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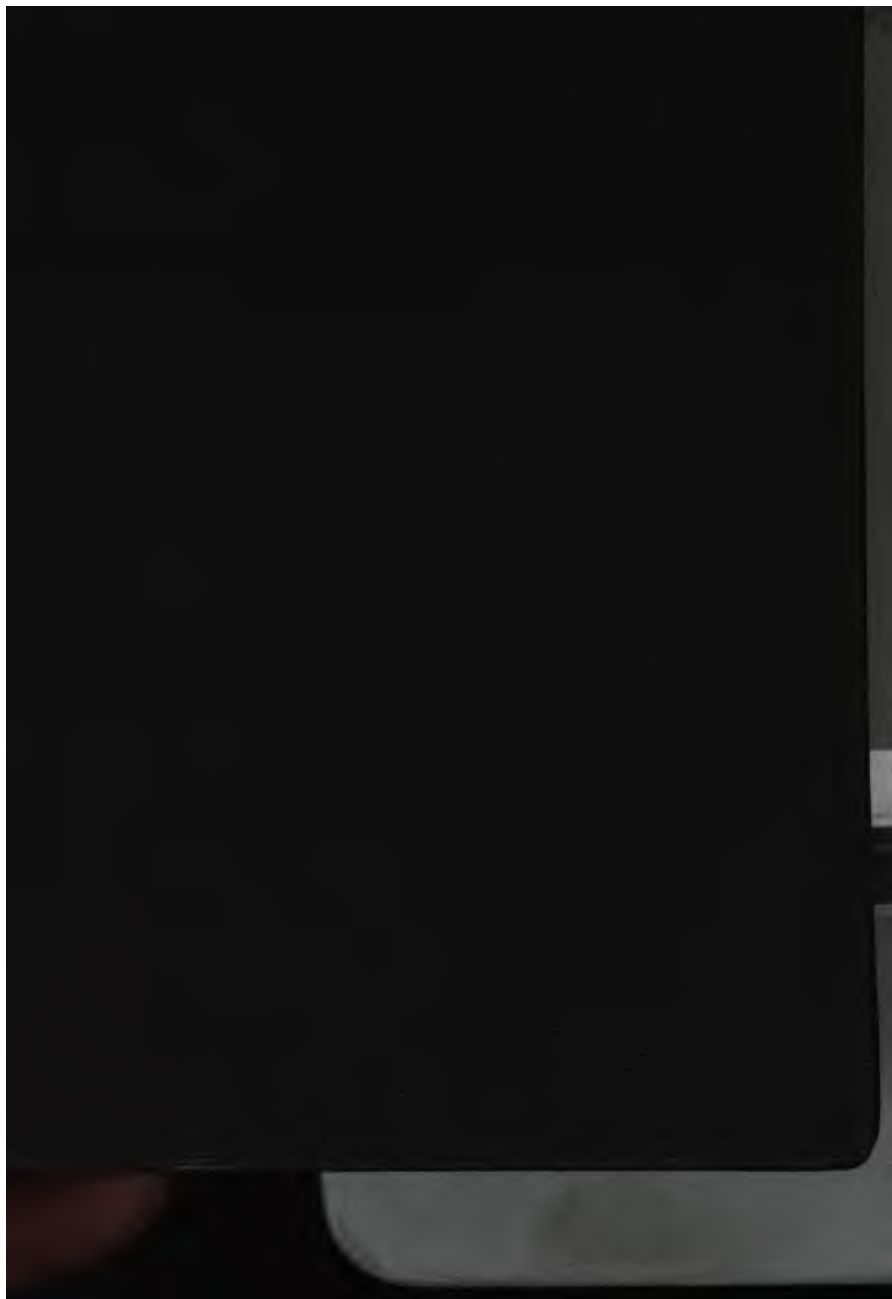
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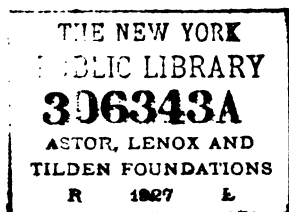
("THE DUCHESS")

AUTHOR OF

"MOLLY BAWN," "HER LAST THROW," "MRS. GROFFREY," ETC.

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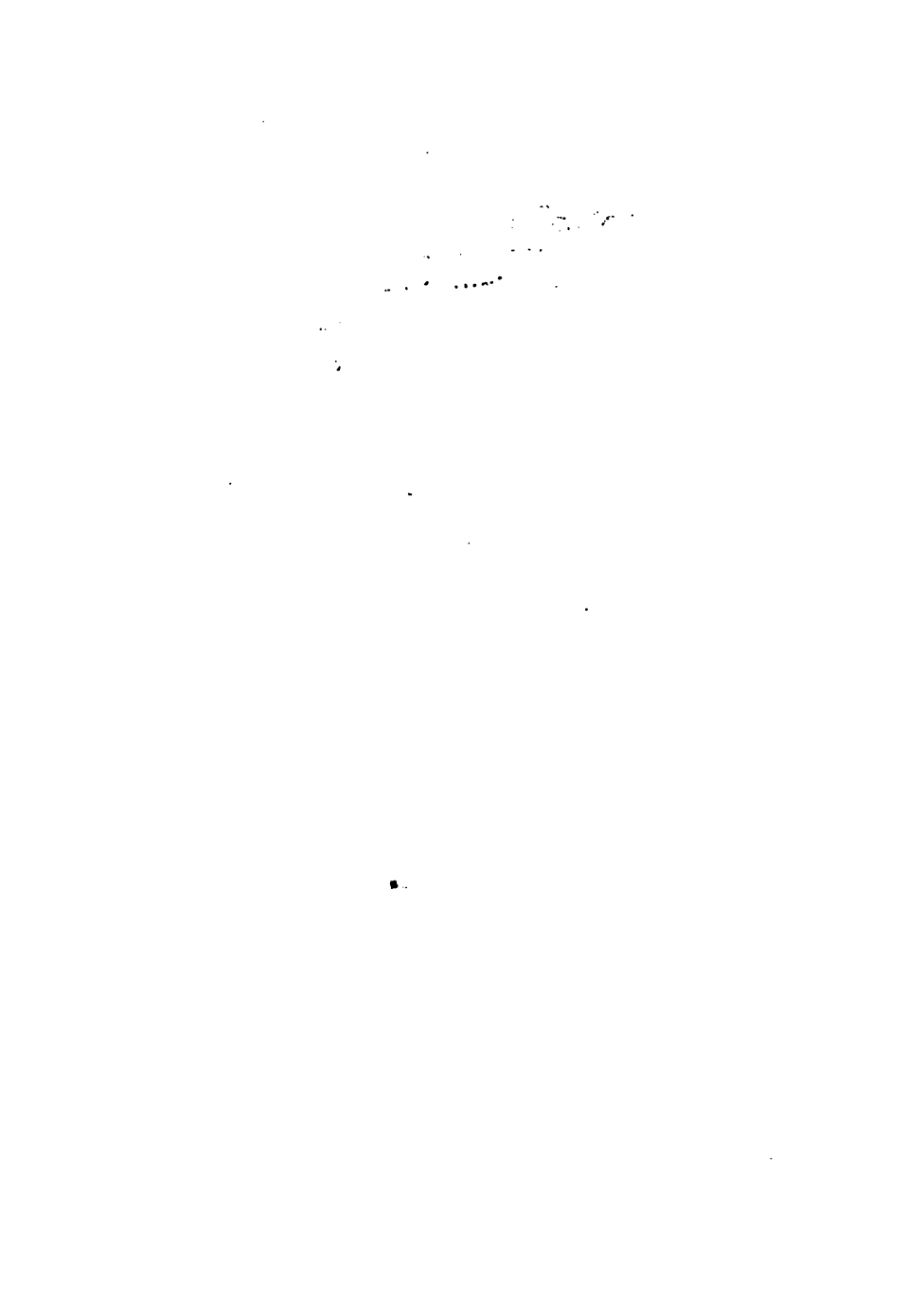
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ROY WOOD
JUL 25
1927

TO
MY COUSIN
MARY HAMILTON
IN MEMORY OF A DAY THAT I HOPE
SHE TOO REMEMBERS

31. BRENDA'S.
July.





THE
O'CONNORS OF BALLINAHINCH.

CHAPTER I.

"To mortal men great loads allotted be,
But of all packs, no pack like poverty."

"Poor old Dad!" says Kitty, softly sighing. Kitty could hardly do anything *but* softly, she is so fair and so plump. *Fat* is a horrid word! We always call Kitty plump, it sounds so much better. She is two years younger than Geraldine (who is twenty-one) and a year older than I am. Her height is about five feet nothing, and she has melting blue eyes, and a lovely mouth, and the jolliest temper *I* know. I do love Kitty!

"Oh! it's a shame, a shame!" cry I, with all the vehemence that characterises me. "*Fancy* his having to give up his hunter, and hunting is just the one thing

he loves best. Darling Dad ! I can't bear to think of it."

"And just at the end of his life, too," says Geraldine, who, for her, seems wonderfully sympathetic. Of the three of us, Geraldine is the one least likely to give herself away on the score of emotion. She is tall and dark, and rather Spanish in appearance. The south of Ireland has produced these Spanish types every now and then, ever since the landing (as they *say*) of the Spanish Armada. But they say so many things nowadays that one never feels sure of the truth of anything. At all events, Geraldine is as dark as though a southern clime had ripened her, whilst as for me—I am nothing—nothing at all. A mere 'twixt and between—a sort of balance for the other two. Geraldine is taller than I am—a very little taller—Kitty is shorter ; Geraldine is darker, Kitty is fairer ; Geraldine is what is generally called a "fine girl" (though you couldn't possibly make her madder than to tell her so, and, indeed, Kitty and I reserve this expression for occasions when *Geraldine hasn't* been to us all she ought to be) ; Kitty, as

I have said, is plump, whereas I am so tall and so thin that they all laugh at me, and make unkind jokes about the "lean kine," and all that sort of thing.

I don't believe, however, I am half as bad to look at as they make me out, though of course I wish my nose was a bit straighter ; but my eyes are nice anyway, real Irish eyes, grey with a smudge beneath them, and Dad says I'm the image of my great-grandmother, Madam O'Connor ; and *she* was a toast in her day. Dad says I'll be the flower of the flock, but I misdoubt my nose, and my hair is awfully hard to keep tidy.

In spite of the unmistakable note of sympathy in Geraldine's last words they anger me.

"I don't see why it should be the end of his life," say I, with a frown.

"Neither do I," says Kitty, resentfully. "He can't be more than sixty, anyway, and it's going against the Bible to call a man old till he's seventy."

"He looks as young as *any one*," continue I, fiercely.

"He is not as young as you, at all events," says

Geraldine, calmly, "and, as you say, he *is* sixty. And to be worried at *his* age means——" She pauses, and draws a deep breath. "It means many things," she says.

"Oh! I wish, I wish we could do something," says Kitty, half crying. "What *fools* girls are! They can do nothing on earth but sit at home and cast ashes on their heads, or something else equally ludicrous and useless."

"They can do more than that, surely," says Geraldine, who sits always on the opposition bench. "They can cook and sew, and——"

"Oh, I daresay," says Kitty, impatiently. "They can do many things, a thousand things, but not one single thing that can bring in even a hundred a year. At least, *we* can't! What can we do that will save Dad from selling Blueskin?"

"Oh, *dear* Blueskin!" say I, and forthwith I burst into tears. I am the crying one of the family. On all occasions, on every occasion, I can be relied upon for "*Tears, idle tears.*" Even Kitty's melting blue *eyes* have never turned out as many tears as my

grey ones. I am ready at any moment to weep the woes of the family ; but never, since the rents have begun to fail us, have I felt so hearty a desire to cry as now, when Dad's lovely hunter has to be sold to pay some pressing debts. Well, thank God! we always have paid our debts up to this, and though the old house, that once was the finest in the county, is now a barren desert, still, to owe no man aught, is as proud a boast as one can deliver. Oh! if all those tales of grandfather's reputed wealth had *but* been true! But it seems—miser as he was—that he died penniless. I have always hated his memory, because they say he hated Dad!

Truly, my tears now are not altogether idle. Who could but weep the downfall of a good old name. Dear old Dad! Darling Dad! To think that things have come to such a sad pass with him, that he must deprive himself of the one great pleasure of his declining years. For though I quite *hated* Geraldine for saying that, about the end of his life, there is no doubt but that there was a time when he *was younger!*

So no more hunting for poor Dad. That's what it really means. And all because those hateful tenants have had it all their own way, and are now paying only a third of their rents. As if the land wasn't Dad's—his very own! I call it *scandalous*, that one must give up the good acres that no doubt one's forefathers fought hard for and spent their blood to gain! But there is no justice nowadays; and, *anyway*, I think the Queen ought to send Dad a good hunter in place of dear old Blueskin!

Fancy a meet here, in this county, with not one O'Connor on the field! Oh! it's bad to think on!

"After all," says Kitty, with a view to consoling me, "if he sells Blueskin now, he may be able to buy him back again before the winter. One never can tell *what* may turn up. This is only June—*early* June—and there won't be anything, except cup hunting, until November. By that time Dad may be able to buy another horse, and——"

"Ah, but not Blueskin. Once he parts with him——"

"True!" says Kitty, sorrowfully. "Once sold, how difficult it is to get a thing back again."

"Did you hear," says Geraldine, who has been busy adding up accounts at the old desk in the corner, "who the intended purchaser is? One of those men belonging to the cavalry regiment that has just come to Clonbree."

"No," say I. In spite of myself I feel interested.

"One of the new men?" says Kitty. And then, pensively, "I wonder what they are like?"

"I don't suppose we shall ever know," says Geraldine, discontentedly. "We're not likely to see them, as we can't entertain; and Clonbree being four miles off, they are not likely to see much of *us*. Now Dad is selling Blueskin he will have only the old mare to fall back upon, and that will leave us with nothing."

"And anyway we haven't a trap," says Kitty. "The springs of the old Norwegian are hopelessly done for now; even *rope* won't hold them together. Oh! no, there is nothing for us but to put our heads in bags and keep them there."

"And such *nice* heads!" says Geraldine, throwing

down her pen, and beginning to pace up and down the old schoolroom. "Good Heavens! what's the good of being handsome and decently bred, if one can't *show* oneself. Look at those Colberts. Common people, English brewers, or button-makers, or anything else you like! *They* can be seen! *They* have their carriage and their beautiful house, and can ask people to dinner without a tearing pain at their hearts as to whether the cook will send up the fowl raw, or in a hopeless mash! Oh!" says Geraldine, stopping short in the middle of our most dilapidated room. "I *want* to be rich. I could be so good, so kind, if *only* I was rich."

A sudden sharp feeling of grief for Geraldine wakens within me. She is right—*right*. Here are we, of good old family, the best in the county, on our last legs, whilst other people, who have no pretensions whatsoever to good breeding, are beginning to lord it over us. It is hard.

"What's the name of the man who is going to buy Blueskin?" ask I, presently.

"Sir Willoughby Heriot."

"What a mouthful!" say I, spitefully.

"A nice name, I think," says Kitty, who is always amiable.

"I shall always hate it," declare I, impetuously.—I think now, however, that it is very bad to be young sometimes; and I confess I'm sorry that I said *that*, at all events.

"Is he a young man?" asks Kitty.

"Young? I don't know. Bridget saw him; she was at Clonbree yesterday, you know, with the eggs and the fowl, and she says she *heard* of him."

"I think you might have told us that before," says Kitty.

"I forgot it. He seemed unimportant until I knew he was to be the purchaser of Blueskin. He was in the market-place, and some one pointed him out to Bridget. He is *big*, she says, and ugly. Extraordinarily ugly."

"And so *he* is to buy Blueskin," cry I. "Of *course* he's ugly. He must be a demon! I feel"—passionately—"as if I *hated* him!"

"On the contrary, I suppose one should feel grate-

ful to him," says Geraldine, who is always so terribly material. "Dad has to sell ; this man wants to buy. He is an Englishman of good means. He will probably give a better price than the people round here. No doubt he is a man to be cultivated, if (bitterly) we *could* cultivate any one."

"He must be a fool," say I, "to buy a hunter in *June* ! Whoever heard of such a thing. To keep him idle all the summer ! Just like those English idiots !"

"I don't see that," says Kitty. "He will be stationed here till next spring certainly, and say he is fond of hunting, and sees a horse that suits him and fears the chance of losing him, why, then, he buys him, and being a man of money does not feel the loss."

"A man of money !" says Geraldine thoughtfully. She pauses as if thinking, and then looks up. "*Rara avis* in these parts," says she.

"In our lives certainly," says Kitty.

"And to think we cannot even *see* him," says Geraldine.

"What a fuss about nothing," say I. "I hate

titled people, they think such a lot of themselves."

"Still, those men at Clonbree can't be *all* titled," puts in Kitty with a sigh. "And I confess I should like to see some of them."

"In that quarter hope lies dead," say I.

"Molly," says Geraldine sternly, "whilst there's life there's hope. Something may yet crop up to— Oh !"—staring out of the window—"here comes Dad !"

CHAPTER II.

"To despise money on some occasions leads to the greatest gain."

DAD, beyond all doubt, is the biggest man in the county—which is Cork. I don't mean so much in status as in stature—though there *was* a time—, well,—no matter!—and, like most big men, he has a heart of gold. In this way fortune, perhaps, meant to make it up to him, as certainly his pockets are singularly devoid of that useful metal. Hitherto we have hardly cared about that, but for the past six months it has been borne in upon us in many strange ways, that money, even though it be the root of all evil, is also the root of every comfort, big or little, that one may desire ; and there has been such a sad want of it of late.

"Well," says Dad, coming into the room, his handsome face so downcast that we all run to him, "so here you are, girls."

"Yes, yes," cry I; "and Blueskin, Dad?"

"He's gone—he's sold," says Dad, with a groan, sinking into one of the chairs that groans in concert—probably on account of his weight. Chairs, as a rule, are not sympathetic, though in a case like this, no doubt, they would stretch a point.

"Oh, no! not *really*," says Kitty.

"Yes, really. I've seen the last of him," says poor Dad, trying to smile.

It is the most sorrowful smile that ever I saw.

"Oh, I think you might have waited," cry I, to whom Blueskin was as the apple of my eye—Blueskin, who watched for and got every morning the expected lump of sugar from my fingers. "Oh, what a *hurry* you were in!"

"I wasn't," says Dad, ruefully, "I let it go as far as I possibly could. But when it came to the end——"

"What end?" asks Geraldine.

"Well, those bills," says he. "You know that unfortunate Mrs. Duffy, the butcher's wife? They've fallen into difficulties, and—well, she was bound to

be paid anyway. And so I——, well, that's all. Blueskin is gone." He rises abruptly and going over to the window, stands there with his back turned to us, drumming away at it with fingers that tremble a good deal.

Kitty, who is nearest to him, goes up to him quickly and flings her arms around his neck. Kitty, I have heard, is like my dear mother, who died a year after I was born.

"Never mind it, Dad," says she. "It might be worse."

"Why, that's it, my pet; that's what enables me to keep up," says Dad, stroking her fair hair, his voice sounding rather choky, and his eyes fixed on that golden head. Are there tears in those hidden eyes? "It might be worse, certainly." He pauses, and then, in a very low tone, "Your mother might have been alive!"

Kitty tightens her clasp round his neck, and we all go up to him and pat him softly. Poor darling Dad.

"Now you see how much worse it might have been," says he, pulling himself together, as it were,

and laughing nervously as though ashamed of his emotion. "Why," —seizing Kitty by the shoulders and shaking her softly to and fro, with a sad attempt at the old lightness of spirit—"I might have had to sell *you*."

"You couldn't," says Kitty, showing all her pretty teeth. "I should cling and cling to you, till the buyer got tired. So *there*! And besides"—sighing dolorously—"I don't believe there would be *any* buyer!"

At this we all laugh, which does us good; but presently Dad gets serious again.

"What weighs upon me is," says he, "that there is something worse to come."

This from *Dad*! the lightest-hearted man in the world, gives us a thrill.

"Oh, no," say I. "The selling of Blueskin cannot mean universal destruction, bad though it is. Surely some of the tenants——"

"Oh! the tenants," exclaims Dad bitterly. "The tenants have it all their own way now."

"I do hate the Queen!" cries Kitty so vehe-

mently that we begin to wonder whether her head will or will not be cut off presently at a second's notice.

"But why, my dear?" asks Dad, who is a staunch Conservative in spite of all private wrongs; and surely *this* should be laid to his credit, considering how he has been cheated and swindled and *ruined* by the present Government.

As for me, I am a red-hot Republican, and I rather applaud Kitty's speech, though I have not so much the courage of my opinions as to do so, even in the bosom of my family. I cannot bear to vex Dad. And Dad loves his Queen.

"But why?" demands Dad again, as sweetly as though all things were going well with him. "She is a most excellent lady—a lady in the true sense of the word, so far as *I* can see. But she, too, has to obey, as well as the rest of us."

"Obey! fancy a Queen obeying!" says Kitty contemptuously.

"Well, anyway," cry I, "I want to hate somebody just now, and if it isn't to be the Queen it shall be Lord Salisbury."

"My *dear*! An excellent statesman—the finest statesman of the age. But *he* has to obey also, in a sense."

"Very good, then," says Kitty, who is plainly in a fractious mood. "I hate *everybody*—*everybody* impartially—who has helped to bring you to so low an ebb."

"And who has compelled you to sell Blueskin," supplement I strongly.

"I hope you got a good price for him, at all events," says Geraldine, who is, as I have hinted, eminently practical.

"Very good," says Dad sadly. The old favourite was hard to part with. "I sold him to Sir Willoughby Heriot, one of the men now stationed at Clonbree. He seems a decent fellow, and—and looks as if he would be good to a dumb thing. And," says Dad somewhat shamefacedly, "and besides, I confess I was glad to sell the poor beast to a man who lived so near. It's only five miles from here to Clonbree, and I hear the regiment will be stationed there until

March beyond doubt. I can therefore get a look at Blueskin now and then."

"You *liked* Sir Willoughby," says Kitty. "What kind of a—of a man is he?"

"Good sort of fellow all through, I should say, and *thoroughly* bred. But by Jove, girls," says Dad, turning to us all, "as ugly a divil as ever you saw!"

"English, of course?" question I.

"Why so?" asks Geraldine. "That's the last query you should make. Englishmen are proverbially handsome."

"I meant nothing," say I, lifting my shoulder at her. "Go on, Dad; is he English?"

"Oh! to the backbone," says he. "But as good a fellow as ever you met, for all that. I liked him; yes, I did," says Dad, with a magnanimity that only he could have shown, "though he *was* the purchaser of Blueskin. I hope to goodness he will be kind to him. But he *can't* understand him as we did."

Here Dad relapses into melancholy, and we all grow depressed in concert.

"I tell you what, girls," says Dad presently; "we

shan't be able to hold out much longer. I'm thinking of" (hesitating, and looking away from us) "of selling the lower farm."

"Oh, don't, Dad, don't do that, Daddy, darling," cry I, seeing how the bare suggestion hurts him. "Take *time*——"

"Time! Where's the time at my age?" interrupts he sadly. "Time rests with you youngsters; and, indeed, of late I have thought of selling the entire estate and living on the interest of the money gained, so that all of you might have something to look forward to at my death beyond the hopeless hope of getting your rents now and then. We might realise a little money that way, and we could go abroad, and live cheaply, and——"

"*Die!*" says Geraldine. "We shall certainly not do that, Dad, if we can help it. Do you think it would recompense us to see you living in a foreign country, without one of the old acres to stroll over. No, indeed! You say you want to secure *our* happiness—that could never be secured at your expense."

"Fancy your living away from Ballinahinch," supplement I. "Why, you couldn't."

"I should be wretched, I know," says Dad, who has drawn Geraldine towards him, as if grateful to her. "But if it was for your good—for yours I'm a bad father to you," says poor Dad, who is the best of all fathers in all lands. "I seem to have made ducks and drakes of everything. All that is left you is the insurance on my life."

"Look here," says Geraldine—and, indeed, I didn't expect it from her—"sell that insurance," says she; "it may get you out of your present difficulties, and then you may be able to pull up a bit. Never mind us. He needn't—eh, girls?" with a backward glance in our direction. "I daresay we shall get on well enough without it."

After all, there is a great deal of good in old Gerry.

"I shan't do that, anyway," says Dad, grimly, though his eyes are full of tears. "Better sell the farm than do that. And sold it must be!" He sighs and looks at us. "I shall have to leave home, chil-

dren, at once, for a month or so, on a bare chance of getting my affairs settled. I'll have to start to-morrow."

"*To-morrow!*"

"Yes, the sooner the better. Not," dismally, "that I expect any good results from my journey. It is the smallest chance on earth, but I don't like to abandon it. I must first run up to Dublin to see Frisk and Farmer, and then over to Worcestershire to see a cousin of your poor mother's. I shall be a month away altogether, and so I have written to your Aunt Martha to come and take care of you whilst I am away."

"Aunt Martha!" exclaim I, in a dying tone.

"Aunt Uniacke!" says Geraldine, using our dreadful aunt's surname.

"*That* aunt!" cries Kitty indignantly.

"Well, where was I to get another at a moment's notice?" demands Dad, very reasonably too, of course, though plainly he is quailing. Indeed, his voice has taken the low note that shows he is ashamed of himself.

A low, simultaneous groan escapes us all. Words fail us.

"I can't help it," says Dad. "There is no one else, and I couldn't well go away and leave you without protection of any sort."

"But Aunt Martha of all people," says Kitty.

"Look here," says Dad, as if driven to extremities, "it won't weigh with you, I'm afraid, and it seems rather, well—er," colouring, "confoundly *mean*, you know, but the fact is, she's got lots of money. Thirty thousand, if a penny, and—and—why shouldn't you children get it? You're her own nieces (though how she came to be your poor mother's sister Heaven alone can tell). You are her nearest of kin. God knows!" says poor Dad mournfully, "I'm the last fellow in the world to advocate mercenary principles, but when it comes to leaving you all penniless in a cold world, one—well—one has to moderate one's views. And,"—pausing, and almost compelling us by his entreating look to agree with him—"she's a good woman, you know."

Almost he caught us, but not quite; as a fact,

indeed, and I'm going now to record it; as it was the first and only time in our lives, we all fail him.

"She's a *beast*!" says Kitty, simply but promptly.

"She's more than that : she's a demon," cry I.

"If she takes the keys again, Dad," said Geraldine, with dangerous calm, "I shall undoubtedly murder her!"

Geraldine being a person born without a spark of humour in her composition, this terrible threat is probably meant.

"She means thirty thousand pounds," says poor Dad again, who, nevertheless, I can see is in sympathy with us, and is, therefore, a miserable pleader.

"Would I be doing you justice if I denied you the chance of gaining it? And once she sees you—so improved after all these years—she will certainly put you into her will." He pauses, and braces himself for an effort. "Anyway, she's coming," says he.

"Oh! Dad!"

"I declare to goodness I never meant to hide it from you!" says Dad vehemently, with the free use of gesticulation that adorns his conversation when

excited, "but yesterday, when I found I had to leave home, I telegraphed to her upon the spot, and then I went off to Moriarty about that red cow (he won't buy her, by the way), and I forgot all about your aunt until a telegram came from her just now. Here it is," pulling it out of one of his capacious pockets.

"She's coming, then?"

"Yes. To my astonishment; and rather to my relief too. I never thought she'd darken these doors after *that last time*!"

Here he looks round at us, the irresistible sparkle of a good thing remembered in his eyes. This glance to us is like tinder to dry wood: we all burst simultaneously into the gayest laughter.

"Oh! By jingo, girls! D'ye remember it? *Do you?*" says Dad, slapping his leg and roaring.

"Don't I!" says Kitty, her plump little sides shaking. "It is quite ten years ago, yet I can *see* it now."

"Ha-ha-ha!" shouts Dad, his jolly infectious laughter ringing through the room as lightly and gaily as though ruin is a million miles away. "And

the *cat* ! D'ye recollect how she sat down on the cat, and the yell that the poor old divil of a tabby gave, and—ha-ha-ha—the bounce of the old woman—another tabby, by Jove !—and—ha-ha !—— On my life, girls !”—wiping his eyes—“what a day that was ! But not cheap—not cheap !”

“Oh, it *was* cheap,” say I. “She went away.”

“No. It was dear. It endangered that thirty thousand pounds. If we hadn't laughed—but we *did*. I'll never forget how *you* laughed”—pinching Kitty's ear. “I believe it was *you* who ruined us. Anyway, she packed up, bag and baggage, and shook our dust off her feet within an hour.”

“So unfair,” say I. “All because she chose to squash our good-looking cat.”

“*She* put it otherwise,” said Geraldine. “She said it was because her nieces were hopelessly spoiled and that we were all hardened villains.”

“Well ; we *very* nearly lost the thirty thousand then,” says Dad ; “let us do our utmost to recover it now. Do be good to her, girls. Do, now. It's only for a month ; and really you have the best right to it.

You are the children of her only sister ; she had no brothers. Now, for heaven's sake," says Dad, giving us an appealing glance all round, "*do* promise me that you will behave decently to her."

"We'll try," says Geraldine faintly.

"That's good girls now," says Dad, patting Gerry's shoulders, and beaming on Kitty and me. "By the bye," says he, "your cousin, Fanny L'Estrange, is in Clonbree ; her husband, Tom L'Estrange, is the captain of the detachment sent down. She was one of the Burkes of Conmore, you know, and I'd like you to call on her. She's taken one of those detached houses just hanging on to the town. When can you go? To-day, eh?"

"You will come too, Dad?"

"No, I can't," says Dad, hurriedly. "To tell you the truth, girls, I'd rather not. What's the good of my calling?"

"Do you mean to say you won't even call at the Barracks?"

"No," says Dad, sadly, "I can't entertain. It is as good to make up our minds to that at once. And

what would they care about an old fellow like me, who could do nothing but jabber to them of the past days, when the O'Connors were as good as the best? No, my dear, I shan't call; but your cousin—she will understand; and if she is at all like her mother she must be a nice creature. And at all events I wouldn't have her neglected."

"But how are we to go? The mare——"

"No, I want her myself. It is early yet. Drop a line to old Walsh in the village, and tell him to send up his outside car at two."

"That will cost seven shillings," says Geraldine.

"And the driver?" say I.

"Two shillings more."

"It can't be helped," says Dad. "If I could only have kept old Blueskin, this expense might have been spared; but you wouldn't be rude to your own first cousin."

"No, no, of course not; only——"

"I hope the driver will be Mickey-the-Saint," says Kitty.

"I hear Fanny has her brother staying with her—

young Paddy Burke," says Dad. "A nice fellow enough, I'm told; but don't fall in love with him, girls, whatever you do. Three hundred a-year is all he has in the world. His brother inherits the property."

"What a *name*!—*Paddy*!" says Kitty, with deep disdain.

"I'd better send a line to Walsh about the car at once," says Geraldine.

CHAPTER III.

"Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear."

"Be ready for all changes in thy fortune ;
Be constant when they happen."

WITHOUT a second's delay we send down a message to our village to Walsh, the car-owner there, to know if he can let us have an outsider within an hour. His reply electrifies us.

"Dear Mam,—The car you can have, if the weather holds up, and if *D. V. permits!*"

"I think it ought to be framed and glazed," says Kitty, holding this unique epistle at arm's length.

"Or sold!" suggests Geraldine, who is, as I have said, *nothing*, if not practical.

"Oh! come. Let us hurry and dress," cry I.
"We haven't a moment to spare. It is now nearly an hour since we sent for the car."

Indeed we have hardly time to bundle ourselves

into our Sunday-go-to-meeting garments, before a well-known whoop is heard, and, rushing to the window that overlooks the avenue, Kitty and I see Mickey-the-Saint tearing up to the hall door, the little mare for once well in hand.

Mickey-the-Saint—who might have been called Mickey the other thing without fear of libel—is one of our celebrities. He is a small man of nondescript age (anything from twenty to ninety would have suited him), with twinkling black eyes, a “game leg” (as he himself poetically describes it), and the richest vocabulary in Europe. The lame member was acquired in one of the many scuffles that enlivened his youth, but the vocabulary is the result of many years’ ardent study of the liberal swearers of the county. Neither of these accomplishments, however, beyond the fact that the first has given him an aristocratic sort of carriage, has had any effect upon Mickey. He is superior to effects. As a profound philosopher—and whip—Mickey is scarcely to be rivalled.

“Good-day, Mickey!” cry we all in chorus ; we

have run down to the doorstep ready dressed and eager to be off.

“Good-day, yer honours; an’ good luck. ’Tis for Clonbree ye’ll be, the day? (Hould up, Mary Kate, what the divil ails ye now?)” This to the small brown, vicious-looking mare, who is now bouncing between the shafts as madly as if attacked by a dozen horseflies—those pests of summer.

“I hope she’s quiet to-day, Mickey?” says Geraldine, nervously, who, in spite of her commanding presence, is just as great a coward as any of us. We are all, in fact, looking askance at “Mary Kate,” whose exploits are by no means sealed books to us.

“*Quite*, is it?” asks Mickey, as amazed as though he had never yet heard of a fault in the little brown mare. “Arrah! *look* at her,” with a wave of his arm. “*Quite*? ’Tis a lamb she is! . . . Bad scan to ye, ye thief of the world!” as the mare makes a vicious plunge forward, nearly throwing Mickey off the seat, as “Sally,” our little rough-haired terrier, makes an excursion between her forefeet.

“Maybe now,” says Mickey, hurriedly, turning to

us, with a genial grin, and a determination to take our minds off "Mary Kate," "ye didn't hear o' Dan Murphy an' his pig? Well, ye know, Miss, dear, he's not *all there*, is ould Dan, an' fegs, when he foun' he had to go to Cork last week, he jist tied up the old sow to his bed-post, an' locked the cabin, an' away wid him for a week's journey (he walked it, iviry stip—a matter o' fifty mile), an' niver remimbered that the poor crather would want her bit an' sup whilst he was away! An' o' coorse, Miss, whin he come home the poor misfortunate divil of a pig was, to spake politely, no more! An' thin, me dear, sich a screechin' an' a hilla-bulloo as he sit up! Why ye'd hear him in Clonbree, and now he's goin' the round o' the counthry wid a paper from Father John below" (this refers to the village, Father John being still above ground), "gittin a shillin' or two iverywhere to make up the price of another pig. I saw the Masther give him half-a-crown, ere yestherday."

No doubt! If it was Dad's *last* half-crown any one in trouble would be sure to get it.

"Will it be wet, Mickey?" ask I, with an anxious

thought for my raiment, and especially for the six-penny straw hat that Kitty, who is a genius at millinery, trimmed for me last week.

"The finest day iver came out o' the hivens!" says Mickey, promptly, who would have said just the same were the "hivens" filled with thunderclouds. "Not a dhrop o' rain in the sky, no more than there's tear-drops in yer purty eye! Faix, that's pothry! 'Tis lucky intirely we'll be this day! Tear-an-ages, what's the matther wid ye *now*?" as Mary Kate, seeing Bridget shaking a white cloth out of a window, betrays a sudden desire to uprise and fly, either at it, or out of her skin—it is impossible to be sure which.

"Oh, Mickey! I really *do* think she seems very wild to-day," says Geraldine, who has grown quite pale.

"Wild!" cries the indomitable Mickey, fixing his old "caubeen" tighter on his head, it having been considerably loosened by Mary Kate's last skit. "An' is that," contemptuously, "what ye call wild? Faix, 'tis fearin' we'll have to sell her, we are, her sperrits is gone so low of late. Are ye settled, Miss?"—to Kitty.

We are all now seated on the outside car. "An' have ye got yer parrysols? for fegs, the sun is hot enough to roast the skin off yer faces! an *that*"—with a most deferential but appreciative glance all round—"would be a murdherin' pity. Are ye ready now, yer honours?"

"Yes, Mickey,"—faintly.

"Well, hould tight, all o' yees, till we get a start out of her."

We all hold as tight as we can, our hearts in our mouths. Mary Kate is an old enemy. Mickey raises his arm, and down comes the whip on her loins without any results beyond the fact that she lowers her head, plants her forefeet in the ground, and looks all at once as if she had been *glued* to this particular spot.

Mickey gives way to a wild string of objurgations whilst we cling madly to our seats.

"Oh, ye snake!" screams Mickey, in a shrill tone—"ye limb!" (I leave out the adjectives) "Oh! thin, wisha!" and down comes the whip again, *this* time with much result.

Mary Kate backs—backs vigorously—and as just

behind us is a steep bank leading down to the tennis ground, this seems to be a moment for silent prayer.

"Come out o' this ! Come out, I tell ye !" screams Mickey. "Is it to murdher us, ye would, ye wild baste !"

Here Geraldine makes a frantic attempt to throw off the rug and jump down, an attempt that Mickey sees at once out of one of his brilliant eyes.

"Be aisy now," cries he ; "don't stir, Miss Geraldine. Hould on a bit. I'll have the upper hand o' this divil in wan moment, if I've got to take the hide off her !"


Once again the whip descends, *now* upon Mary-Kate's shoulders, with a rattling sound ; she answers to it ! There is one wild shy to the right that all but takes us down a heavy slope and into the kitchen window, another wild shy to the left that nearly lands us in the middle of a thick clump of elms. There is a sudden upheaval of earth, and car, and horse, as it seems to me, and then—we are flying up the avenue at the rate of twenty miles an hour.

The trees rush past us, the few remaining grains of

gravel fly up like spray round the mare's feet. Providentially the entrance gate is open, and through it we—turning the corner so sharply as to carry off with us a ruminating spider that had been perched upon the stone wall—go careering up the roadway at a breakneck speed.

Ah, a breakneck speed for two and a half minutes ! A pretty stout bit of hill showing itself just now, Mary Kate having, as she believes, sufficiently maintained her character for dash and daring, falls suddenly into a solemn jog-trot—her usual form—and once again we begin to breathe freely.

We relax our agonised hold upon the side irons of the car, and give ourselves up to pleasant gossip. It is not often we get the chance of going into Clonbree, and now, besides our visit to Mrs. L'Estrange (it seems impossible to call her "Fanny") we have such a multitude of small things to do. We have so many small things to buy ! It isn't so much, perhaps, that we want to buy them, as that we desire with all our hearts to see the gay shops in which our trifling purchases are to be had.



We do not deceive ourselves for a second as to the amount of our outlayings. It has never suggested itself to any one of us that the shops will find a material difference in their dividends at the end of the year because of our going into Clonbree to-day ; for all that, yet we do enjoy the going.

Perhaps, after all, we are too modest, and the shopkeepers *may* get a lift through us.

Geraldine, for example, wants a yard of ribbon, the colour of old gold ! And I want some twisted hairpins. Our village doesn't run to twisted hairpins ! It can only supply those long, vulgar, straight hairpins, that just support the heavy tresses for a minute or two, and at which my unruly hair laughs aloud. Kitty wants some India muslin for a hat and a few comic papers.

And now we are nearing Clonbree. We are within half a mile of it, and Mary Kate, who once more feels she has a reputation to maintain, breaks out suddenly from the jog-trot into a most alarming gallop. Again Mickey shouts. Again the mare presses forward. She is evidently bent on surpassing herself

this time. Her heels fly upwards, her head goes downwards. Once again we are told to "hould tight," and like grim death we do hold on, as the mare rattles up the road that leads into Clonbree.

Her tail is cocked, her air, too, *too* victorious, yet all goes well until we come to the corner that leads into the main street.

At this corner sits an old woman before a gooseberry stall. Still fired with a determination to display her powers to all men, the mare dashes onwards, and turning the corner sharply, carries off the old gooseberry woman's cap in her flight.

To our horror (yet certainly to our relief, for we believed her dead), that old gooseberry woman gets up, and, with arms waving aloft and a shrill cry that brings the crowd running together from all sides, pursues us down the street.

"Och! murdher! But I'll have the law of ye!" screams she, whilst Kitty and I, who are sitting at the same side, cling to each other and wish ourselves happily dead. "I'll have the law of ye, ye black-guard!"

"The law of *me*, is it?" says Mickey, pulling up short. "Faix 'tis lucky ye'll be if I don't take the law of you. 'Tis in Cork jail ye ought to be this minit."

"Oh! me head, me head!" screams the old woman, putting up both her hands to that staunch member.

"Yer *head*! An' what about my shafts, ye ould varmint!" cries Mickey. "What d'ye mane be smashin' me good-lookin' shafts wid yer ould cap. Faix, ye'd betther take it aisy, woman, or I'll bring the polis down upon ye."

"On me, is it?" The gooseberry woman has now got her arms akimbo. But Mickey is too excited to heed our passionate remonstrances or our entreaties to drive on.

"The polis on me? On *me* is it?" screams the gooseberry woman. "I'm kilt, I tell ye. Me head's bruk!" (Her head is as sound as ever it was.) "An' you, Mickey Bryan—what d'ye mane be standing up among dacent people? Sure, we all know yer father was on the threadmill, an' yer aunt——"

“Och, murther !” yells Mickey, and with that he touches up the mare again, who, nothing loath, answers to the call, and urging on her wild career, only comes to a dead stop at the door of Mrs. L'Estrange's house—a huge, square-built mansion, decidedly in want of repair, standing just outside the town.

CHAPTER IV.

"But now the hand of fate is on the curtain,
And gives the scene to light."

IF, however, the outside of the house lacks much, the inside of it leaves little to be desired. The signs of wealth are everywhere. Our cousin must be decidedly a woman of means, with a nice sense of beauty. The hanging curtains that divide the one big hall from the other, and the lounging chairs scattered about, with the tables and statuettes, create a favourable impression upon our minds.

"The idea of furnishing a house in this way, when they may be moved in six months!" whispers Geraldine. "Extravagant *I* call it!"

"Delightful, *I* call it," says Kitty.

"If they can afford it!"

"They have no children," say I.

"Good old girl! You've guessed it," says Kitty,

giving me a severe pinch as we all go up the stairs. It is, as she knows, a safe opportunity. It is impossible either to scream or return it, as the drawing-room is now *en evidence*.

Indeed it is thrown suddenly open, and a tall, slim young woman rushes towards us with outspread arms.

"I saw the car drive up," says she, "but of course I couldn't be quite sure who was on it until I saw *you*," pointing to me; "you are the image of your father. Come in, girls. I'm *so* glad I'm at home. Have you lunched? I can get you something in five seconds."

"We have lunched, thank you," says Geraldine. (We had had some bread and butter and strawberry jam before starting.)

"Sure, now?" After all, she *is* Irish, in spite of her English accent, and her travelled air; that "now" settles it. Our hearts warm to her. Even the superiority of her clothes—and they have a *cachet* about them unknown in our remote part of the world—does not prevent us from feeling all at once thoroughly at home with her.

I have met a good many nice people during my life, but Fanny L'Estrange would always rank with me as one of the nicest of them.

She has kissed us all round ; she has given us to understand that we are indeed her cousins, not only in name, but in *earnest*. She has made us take off our hats, and has carried us up to her own room to do our hair, as "a few men are sure to fall in during the afternoon."

Her bedroom is a dream of luxury.

"I met your father," says she, as we are fluffing out our fringes. "And he told me you were likely to call soon ; soon, I thought, might mean to-day, so I asked some of the men here to meet you. I do think Uncle Terence is such a *handsome* man !"

She pauses, and I suddenly recollect that she had thought *me* like Dad. What a *pretty* woman she is !

"Did you ever see so big a house," says she, alluding to her present domicile. "If the regiment belongs to *one* barrack, I certainly belong to another. Have some powder," to Kitty, who is roaming

amongst the many pots on the dressing-table, and who is, indeed, looking rather flushed. Plump people suffer when the sun grows high. "Not know how to use it? Look here." She makes little dabs at Kitty's cheeks, and then, taking out a very cobweb of a handkerchief, rubs her face down in a most careful fashion.

"I feel as if I were a pony," says Kitty, alluding to the rubbing-down business, at which we all laugh in concert; and presently go down to the drawing-room again.

"Why, it's four o'clock," says Fanny L'Estrange, glancing at the little jewel of a clock on the chimney-piece. "Who'd have thought it was so much as that? How late those boys are!"

Even as she speaks, the sound of footsteps on the stairs can be heard. She stops and listens.

"Oh! that's only Paddy," says she, indifferently. "He's staying with us. He's always staying with us."

The name is not promising. It must be the Paddy Dad spoke about.

"Paddy?" says Kitty, question in eyes and voice.

"My brother," says Fanny, nodding her head. "A darling, but without a penny. Now, whatever else you girls do, *don't* look at Paddy. He's a detrimental of the first water, a detrimental of the most dangerous type, because he can't be brought to see it."

Here the detrimental enters the room.

Detrimentials, as a rule, are handsome. Paddy Burke has made a distinct departure. He is as ugly a young man as ever the sun shone on. His hair is red, his eyes are small, his mouth might have done justice to the biggest cod-fish in Christendom. Yet it cannot be denied that he has a few points in his favour. He is six foot one, if anything, and his figure is a splendid thing, and his expression—well, that would have redeemed even an uglier man than himself; when I have said that, I have said everything.

"Oh! here you are, Paddy," says Mrs. L'Estrange. "How late! I have been expecting you for ever so

long. These are the O'Connor girls! You've met Uncle Terence, haven't you. Kiss your cousins, Paddy."

This startling order reduces us all to powder. All except Paddy, who advances doughtily upon me. I am the nearest to him.

"Oh! no," venture I faintly, drawing back. Geraldine repulses him also with a laughing glance. Kitty, however, though blushing and smiling denial, submits prettily to the light cousinly kiss that our ugly cousin imprints upon her cheek.

"Where's Tom?" asks Mrs. L'Estrange.

"I don't know," says Paddy, who has squeezed himself into a corner near the blushing Kitty. "I left him up at the Barracks storming at one of the men."

"Poor old Tom!" says Fanny. "He takes things so absurdly to heart. And the others—where are they?"

"They're coming," says Paddy. "Oh! by the bye, what about this gipsy tea on Friday? The girls ought to promise to meet us," giving us each in turn

a smile that beautifies his ugly face, it is so full of honest *bonhomie* and good humour.

"Of course. Of course they will come," says Fanny genially. "You know that wood, girls, called *Slane*? Yes? About a mile from your place? Oh! that will be splendid. We shall expect you, then."

"I don't know," say I disconsolately. "It would be all right if Dad were at home, but——"

"*Won't* Uncle Terence be here?"

"No. He has to go to Dublin, and from that to England—to—about—to——"

I break down ignominiously. *How* is one to explain to a cousin, especially a well-to-do cousin, the miserable poverty that surrounds us.

"Business!" says Geraldine calmly. Really, Geraldine is very useful at times. "Dad has to go away on business, and our aunt, Miss Uniacke, is coming to us to—look after us until his return."

"Jane Uniacke! I know her," says Fanny, shortly. "Good heavens! I do pity you poor children if you have got to live with Jane Uniacke for a month. *I* had to live with her for a week once, but on the

second day I nearly murdered her, and I've not seen her since."

"Good old Fanny!" says her brother, with deep feeling. It is so deep indeed that we know at once that he too has met with and suffered through Aunt Jane Uniacke. All at once we feel a common thread of sympathy run through us. We have *all* known, we have all hated this one terrible aunt!

"But what has she got to do with your joining us at our gipsy tea?" asks Mrs. L'Estrange, presently.

"I'm afraid she won't let us go," says Geraldine. "She—she says young men were designed by the Evil One!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" roars Paddy Burke. "Oh, what a grand old woman!"

"An old wretch!" says Fanny, indignantly. "Don't mind her, girls. Surely I, as a married cousin, am as good a chaperone as she is, any day; and decidedly more alive to *les convenances*. Now *do* remember—*Friday*. We shall expect you. This is Monday, isn't it?"

"Monday, indeed! Black Monday I was going to

say," says her brother, "until I looked round me!" He does not, however, look much further than Kitty, who, to my astonishment, looks back at him with a beaming smile. Can't she *see* that he is ugly!

"Well, Monday, anyway," says his sister; "and on Friday next we——"

She stops short and turns to the door, which has been just thrown open to admit two men.

"Well, you haven't hurried yourselves," says she, hastening to greet the newcomers; "and when I told you I should want you, too!" There is reproach in her tone. Presently she brings them up to us.

"Geraldine, may I introduce Mr. Dickenson?" says she, and then, "Molly—Sir Willoughby Heriot."

What does she mean? To introduce a mere commoner to Geraldine, and a real live baronet to *me*! I look up.

CHAPTER V.

"The morning rose, that untouched stands
Arm'd with its briars, how sweet it smiles!"

"The fop of fashion is the mercer's friend."

To find the "real live baronet" looking down upon
me!

I bow hurriedly, and almost immediately—taking advantage of the fact that somebody steps between him and me—I move away to a distant window where I sink into a cosy cushioned recess, well behind the curtains. I feel a little shy. Strangers are creatures unknown to us; it had indeed seemed quite a terrible undertaking—our coming to visit our cousin—and now to find ourselves introduced to two strange officers, to say nothing of Paddy Burke, has quite crushed me. My usual rather high spirits completely desert me, and it is with a sigh of relief and thankfulness that I ensconce myself behind the curtains in

this snug retreat. Here, I tell myself, I shall be safe.

A vain telling! Presently the curtains are pushed aside, and here is Sir Willoughby Heriot, with a somewhat uneasy look upon his face. A sharp attack of *mauvaise honte* seizes upon me. I grow crimson. Can there be anything more detestable than a person who stands staring at you, whilst the foolish blood mounts and mounts to your forehead, and your eyes grow wet through nervousness?

"May I sit here?" asks Sir Willoughby, anxiously.

"Ye-es—oh, yes," say I, with the most inhospitable air in the world. I draw my skirts reluctantly aside, and Sir Willoughby seats himself beside me. I take a side glance at him after a moment or so, and it occurs to me that he is almost as nervous as I am. Perhaps he too hates strangers, and if so, as I was the only one of us introduced to him, he has found it easier to devote himself to me than to be forced to break fresh ground and endure new agonies. Something else has occurred to me, too, and that is, why the window seat has not given way beneath his weight.

We always think Dad tall—not only tall, but a decidedly big man, but I am certain Sir Willoughby is both taller and bigger ; and Dad was right—an uglier man than Sir Willoughby it would be difficult to find in three parishes. Paddy Burke is ugly too—but it is a different ugliness from Sir Willoughby's ! The latter is certainly innocent of red hair, but then *his* hair is dull, and dead, and one feels sure that if his barber had not *all but* shaved him, it would be rough as an Irish terrier's. His eyes are small, his mouth huge, his nose goes heavenward. Yet, with all this, it is not a repulsive ugliness. The small eyes are kindly, the large mouth is pleasant. I am quite fair enough to admit this, though I confess a feeling of contempt for him, because of his lack of beauty, dominates my foolish breast.

So *this* is the purchaser of dear old Blueskin ! Oh, if I might only say a word or two to him !—a *little* word about the treatment of that darling horse. His lump of sugar in the morning, for example ; and his bite of bread and the kiss between the eyes *that I* used to give him, and that he always

seemed to look for *just* as anxiously as for the sugar.

"You don't live here, do you?" asks the giant seated beside me.

"No, not here ; about five miles from Clonbree. You"—shyly—"you may have heard of Ballinahinch. You met Dad—father, I mean"—blushing afresh—"didn't you?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't quite catch your name," says Sir Willoughby, colouring in turn.

"O'Connor—Molly O'Connor," say I.

"Oh!—ah!—of course. O'Connor—Mo——*Miss* O'Connor! I *have* met your father—saw him this morning."

"Yes, I know," say I, bending my head. My eyes have grown suddenly full of tears. "You—you bought Blueskin from him."

"So I did," says Sir Willoughby ; "and very proud I am of my purchase. Some of these Irish horses are very handsome. But Blueskin!—what a name!"—laughing. "I shall change it, I think."

"Oh, don't!" cry I, vehemently ; "*please* don't ! Why should you think it queer? Wait till his clipping

time comes, and you will see how blue his skin is, even through his lovely black hair! I—I"—unsteadily—"was very fond of that horse; I christened him myself. I *beg* of you not to change his name."

"Did you christen him?" says he. "Why, of course I shan't change it then. Blueskin he shall live and die so far as *I* am concerned." He looks at me furtively, and then, "I am afraid you were very fond of that horse," says he.

"Yes, I was," return I, turning a little away from him. "But that can't be helped now."

A long pause.

"I'm afraid of something else too," says he, in a low tone, "that you will hate me, because—I bought it."

"Oh, no, no!" cry I hurriedly; "you *must* not think so poorly of me as that. On the contrary, as Dad wanted to sell him, I am rather *obliged* to you, you know, for buying him. Only"—I hesitate; here is my opportunity, and yet I hardly know how to use it—"if I might ask a *great* favour of you," falter I, so eager now to gain my poor old Blueskin a happy home

that I forget my shyness, and look up at his new owner earnestly, openly.

"Ask me anything," says he, slowly.

"Well, then, in the morning—I—he is accustomed to get a lump of sugar—about nine o'clock."

"*You* used to give it to him?"

"Yes—I myself. And a little bit of bread, too. And"—I feel choking—"and I used to kiss him just between the eyes, too. Would"—faintly—"would you mind kissing him there—where I kissed him—once every morning. It would not take you a minute, and——" I break down ignominiously.

"Certainly, I should not mind," says he gravely. There is not a suspicion of a smile in his eyes. I should have killed him, I think, had I seen that. "He shall have his sugar, and his bread, and—his kiss, every morning I promise you, until—you get him back again."

"Ah! that will be never," say I, forlornly.

"Never is a long day," returns he cheerfully.

I shake my head; and this conversation having come to an end, and a difficulty about beginning a

second suggesting itself to me, I look anxiously towards the room beyond. Truly *this* is a long day at all events! I watch eagerly for signs of movement on the part of my sisters, but none can I see.

On the back ottoman Kitty and our cousin Paddy are seated, evidently oblivious of time. Indeed, he is talking away to her, and she is talking back to him, in as truly friendly fashion as if they had been acquainted before they were born.

On the central lounge Geraldine is seated, Mr. Dickenson standing opposite to her, eyeglass in eye. I had often read and heard of the genus Dandy. I had never, however, seen a specimen of it—until now! Never up to this have I seen a man so exquisitely dressed as Mr. Dickenson. He is a little man—diminutive, indeed, is the adjective to suit him—with pale, refined features—the startlingly erect figure that belongs to small men, and an eyeglass. Did you ever see a little man who did not look as if he had swallowed the poker? I never did. An unfortunate idea that the straighter they hold themselves

the taller they will look belongs to them all. Yet it never adds even a quarter of a cubit to their stature. This is almost sad, as it must be terrible to them to be always on the strain ; yet no one pities little men ! and they, poor things, are always so ashamed of themselves. Yet, if you notice it, they seldom sit down. They will strut about a crowded drawing-room, trying to look taller than the tallest, and always too dreadfully, dreadfully straight. Of course I am only talking of the *very* little men, of whom Mr. Dickenson seems to be a fine specimen.

An inclination to laugh, as I compare his proportions with Geraldine's, and notice his evident admiration of my handsome sister, is checked in the bud by the fact that *she* seems to see nothing grotesque in the comparison. Mr. Dickenson is evidently much impressed by her beauty, and waits upon her utterances (which are specially dignified to-day) with an expression of respectful, but undisguised, delight.

I rise.

"Are you going?" asks my companion.

"It is getting late," I return, "and we have some

things to buy in the town before we go home. And it is a long drive, and——”

I move forward and up to the end of the room, where our new cousin Fanny is standing talking to a tall, soldierly man, who has, I suppose, only just arrived. It occurs to me that Fanny's manner with him is unnecessarily intimate. She has her hand on his arm. Her voice has fallen to a low tone, and every now and then she gives him a little shake as if to enforce her words. As I come nearer she stops, and, catching my hand, draws me to her.

“This is the third girl!” says she, ever so kindly, and with a lovely smile. “Come, now, Molly, as I have taken a fancy to you, *you* must take a fancy to —my husband.”

Then I find that the tall, soldierly, grave man is the lively Fanny's companion for life. Such a contrast as they make. But a happy one, I tell myself, as I look at her laughing eyes, and notice the kind answering smile in those of Captain L'Estrange. She had married a rich man, but she had taken love with her into her married life.

"Did not Sir Willoughby prove amusing?" asks she with a swift glance to where Sir Willoughby is standing close to the curtains, where we sat. Seeing the negative in my face that I am too polite to breathe, she taps my cheek. "Ah! But amusing people are not always the best," says she. "And now, we have not quite arranged about Friday after all, have we? Is it to be in Slane Wood. That, you tell me, is about a mile from your place. And, as to Aunt Jane!" She crosses over to Geraldine and says something to her. Kitty, who has begun to listen, grows interested.

"I'm *sure* we can get there," says she. "It is only a mile from us. And Aunt Jane——"

"Why not ask Miss Uniacke's permission?" says Captain L'Estrange, suddenly.

Why indeed! If we *had*, we might have secured ourselves a fortune, though, after all, *should* we? Aunt Jane would certainly have refused to let us go, and—I am positive we should have gone all the same.

"Tut, Jack!" says Mrs. L'Estrange. "Little you know about her! Why, the very fact of the girls *asking* permission would make her say no. If I

thought their father would object in the smallest degree I would say nothing, but I *know* Uncle Terence would love them to enjoy themselves."

"Yes ; he would *indeed* !" say I, thinking of darling Dad's delight when we are asked anywhere.

"Then that's settled," says Fanny.

Geraldine rises from her lounge. "It is getting late ; we must go," says she.

Sir Willoughby has crossed the room, and is once again standing by me.

"Must you really go ?" says he. "Well," with a glance at Paddy and Mr. Dickenson, "we will see you off."

To see us off! With Mickey and that awful car !

CHAPTER VI.

"We all of us, in a great measure, create our own happiness, which is not half so much dependent upon scenes and circumstances as most people are apt to imagine."

"OH! thanks!" mumble I, faintly.

I bend my head and brush an imaginary fly off my dress. *To see us off!* To see us mount upon that awful old shandrydan and go careering wildly up the street with Mickey-the-Saint whooping and yelling at every mendicant (and they swarm in Clonbree) he meets! *That's* what it means. No, he shall not see us off if *I* can help it!

"We are not going home just yet," I say with quite wonderful nerve for me. "We are going to do a little shopping before we start for Ballinahinch."

I glance at him almost defiantly. It is a glance born of abject fear, and it has its effect. Sir Willoughby, big as he is, goes down before it. I am

indeed about to congratulate myself on my prowess, when a voice behind me checks my satisfaction. It is the voice of Paddy Burke, and it is jubilant.

“Shopping! I *love* shopping!” says he. “Don’t you, Heriot? I’m going a-shopping as hard as I can. It’s ever so much more interesting than going a-milking. I’ve got such a lot of things to buy! So have you, Kitty, haven’t you?”

It gives me a little shock to hear him call Kitty by her name, but after all, why not? Paddy Burke is our first cousin, and first cousins are privileged—to a certain extent. Yet how Kitty can like it, and I can see she *does* like it, passes comprehension, Paddy *is* so ugly! Very nearly as ugly as Sir Willoughby, and certainly not half so tall, or so—distinguished-looking a man!

“Not much!” says Kitty. Only——”

“You needn’t say it,” breaks in Paddy, whose unbounded spirits appeal to me, in *spite* of one. “I know all about it. I know what a girl’s shopping means! Fortune has not left me sisterless, whatever else she has denied me. A packet of hairpins—girls

love hairpins—and a box of chocolates ; that's the whole thing."

"Well, you're wrong," says Kitty, making him a little moue that seems to enchant him. She seems in the gayest spirits. She has apparently forgotten all about our saint and the anguish that is hurting Geraldine and me, as we call to remembrance that awful old "outsider." "It is Molly that wants the hairpins. And as for the chocolate, we *never* buy chocolate !"

"I felt there was something special about you all when first I met you," says Mr. Burke, thoughtfully, as though that first time had been a year ago. "*Fancy* a girl who doesn't buy sweets !"

"Well, you've seen one," says Kitty.

"And I have fancied her," says Mr. Burke, dreaming, though the glance that he casts at Kitty is anything but dreamy. "But why don't you go in for the succulent chocolate, may I ask? Is the question indiscreet? If so, don't answer. But—really you know—is it a matter of principle? or is it, that it is bad for the teeth—or——"

"Wrong again !" says Kitty, with a charming

smile that displays all her own lovely teeth, and so destroys one of his arguments.

"Set me right, then," says Paddy Burke, who is beginning to look curious. My heart almost stops beating. I can see that Sir Willoughby and Mr. Dickenson are listening, and—*what* is Kitty going to say? I know *too soon*.

"Because we never have a penny between us," says she, and looks at him, and suddenly gives way to her soft musical little laugh, that rings through the room. Oh! how could she! cry I, to my own heart. How could she so have declared the poverty of us? the blood once again coursing my cheek and brow. Impetuously I move aside, and cross to where Geraldine is talking in a low tone to Fanny L'Es-trange.

"I understand. I quite understand," Fanny is saying, in her pretty, kindly way.

"You will tell him to *follow* us. Not to *meet* us. To *follow* us," Geraldine is saying, with great emphasis, and her words, as I catch them, give me much comfort. I can see that she is alluding to the terrible

Mickey. She is anxious to conceal from our new acquaintances—these probably rich young men—the dire sad poverty into which *The O'Connor*—a capital “T,” please—has sunk, owing to nought in all the world but a fault of his own. For if there ever was a faultless, tender, upright, honest man in all this wide sad world it is our Dad. Well—that’s all.

I know what Geraldine is thinking about, quite well ! Of the horses that *used* to be in our stables !—of the carriages that still *are* there ! but are of no use whatever because now we have no horses to draw them ; my heart bleeds for poor old Gerry, and I think she feels my sympathy, because she looks at me, and knows in that one glance that I am feeling with her.

“To *follow* you ! Yes, I know,” says Fanny. “I shall give you time to get out of the town, and to get rid of these boys”—with an expressive glance towards her own guests—“and then I shall send word to your driver.” She presses Geraldine’s hand, and smiles at me. I must say I *do* like a woman who, though rich herself, can understand the shrinkings and dis-

tresses of poor people. I always say it takes *birth* to create that knowledge.

"You see——" begins Geraldine, rather shame-facedly.

"*I* think it is you, who see," says Fanny—"and rather *too much*! What does it matter how you came here! the O'Connors' can account for almost anything. Why, I believe they came in with the *flood*. Well, never mind—never mind; I *know* what you mean. It will be all right, I assure you. Well,"—in a higher and more general tone—"if you *must* go, girls—good-bye; and remember, Friday at four o'clock sharp, in Slane wood."

"Yes, you won't forget, Miss O'Connor, will you," says Mr. Dickenson, as we all move towards the door.

"No," said Geraldine, smiling, and pausing to give him even a more decided farewell than before. This has become necessary, as he shows an open disposition to accompany us downstairs; and once downstairs, why not accompany us still farther, and finally be a witness to our clamber on to that hateful car,

the one thing Geraldine and I have been trying to prevent. As for Kitty——

“I hope I need not bid you good-bye so soon, Miss O'Connor,” says Mr. Dickenson. “You have some shopping to do, I understand, and our way to the Barracks leads us down our one good street. So, you see, your way is our way.”

“Yes! so it is!” says Sir Willoughby, as though just awakening to some pleasant fact.

“Now for the hairpins!” I can hear Paddy Burke say to Kitty in a low tone, and finally, to our dismay, we see all three young men bid adieu to Fanny and scramble down the stairs after us.

We do our modest shopping—under difficulties. I certainly *do* get my hairpins, and Geraldine her ribbon, and Kitty (I've no patience with Kitty! you never saw *any one* so merry as *she* is, all through!) gets her comic papers. But on me rests always the dread of Mickey and his car, so that I hurry through everything, and drag the girls from the fascinating counters as quickly as possible. Several hints I deliver to Sir Willoughby to the effect that he must be

tired, and that I know men hate shopping, and that probably his duties require him at the Barracks, but all are useless. I don't believe now he has *any* duties at the Barracks, and there can't be a question about his being the stupidest young man on record. He *won't* go away. Once indeed, after we have passed the lollypop-shop (a lovely place glowing with colour, and with splendid French sweets in the windows, and boxes tied up with ribbons), and have gone into the "Emporium," as it is grandly called, to buy the hairpins, our entire escort deserts us, but only for a minute or so. They return almost immediately, and it is as we emerge from the Emporium that the last straw falls.

A sound fatally familiar to me greets my ears as I step into the street. It is behind me, and at a considerable distance, but it is a sound once heard never to be forgotten, one that pierces to the marrow! It is Mickey's voice, yelling to the old woman to get out of his way. Fanny had either miscalculated the time, or Mickey the message, or else we had been

too long over our shopping, and now Nemesis is down upon us.

All three young men turn and gaze down the street; we three girls keep steadily onward. Sir Willoughby, hurrying after me, bursts out laughing.

"Did you see that odd-looking fellow?" asks he. "Quite the type of Irish jarvey we read about. You haven't looked? Oh, but you should. *So* comic. But you're accustomed to the class, no doubt. But *do* look at him! He is immense, really!"

There is nothing for it but to look, and indeed it would be useless to pretend ignorance any more, as Mickey is now abreast of us, and to my horror is making signs at me—at *me*—waving his whip frantically over his head, and pulling up Mary Kate until she is almost on her haunches.

"Why—he seems to know you," says Sir Willoughby.

"Yes," say I faintly. "He drove us here.

"Ha! Quite so!" says Sir Willoughby, now more disconcerted than myself. "Now that I look at him there seems to me to be something—er—out of the

common about him." (Certainly there is! Any one who looked at Mick at this moment with his torn old breeches tied up with straw, his coat of many colours, his old caubeen at the back of his head, and his general air of mild hilarity, would thank heaven that he *was* out of the common.) "These old retainers," stammers on Sir Willoughby, not knowing, I hope what he is saying—"are often—er—eccentric, you know, and—er——"

"What nonsense!" interrupt I angrily, yet trembling with shame. "Old Retainer! Do you suppose *he* is one of Dad's servants! He doesn't belong to us at all! We only hired him to come here to-day because—because"—indignantly—"as *you* ought very well to know, we have only the old mare left now, and Dad wanted her."

"I don't see how I was to know there was only the old mare," says Sir Willoughby in a low tone, and so reproachfully, so *abjectly*, that my anger dies away. "I wish I had not bought Blueskin," says he. "You will always hate me when you think of that."

"No, no," say I dejectedly. "I am indeed brought

so low, that now I beckon to Mickey to come up to the curbstone, and in silence I mount my melancholy seat; the other girls follow me. I give a hint to Mickey to start—why prolong this horrid minute. I return Sir Willoughby's warm pressure of my hand in a limp and dejected fashion. Mickey brings his whip down upon Mary Kate's back—we make a start. Sir Willoughby at the last moment flings something into my lap, involuntarily I seize it, and the wrappings having come undone, can see a box of chocolate creams—a huge box—with a long cover; it is heavy, is it one box, or two, or three? I glance up. I feel I ought to refuse them, but it is so *long* since we had any really *good* sweets, that, I'm ashamed to confess, my hand tightens round my present.

“Thank you, thank you,” I cry, impulsively, to the big giant standing on the flagway watching me. I go even further than this. In sheer gratitude I fling to him a beaming smile, and a little gracious wave of my hand.

A second later we have turned the corner at break-neck speed, and soon Clonbree lies behind us.

"See what I've got," cry I, lifting my parcel to let Geraldine and Kitty see it. I am consumed with pride—but it gets a fall.

"I've got one too!" says Geraldine, sedately, but with suppressed satisfaction. "Really you and I, Molly, seem to have been thoroughly appreciated."

"Not so fast. Not so fast," cries Kitty, waving a gorgeous box in the air. "Make room for a little one! I, too, have been appreciated."

My pride, however, is restored. On examination, it is discovered that if they have one box, *I* have three. After all, Sir Willoughby is a kind man. What a pity he is so ugly. Not that it matters; he is not likely to look at any of us again, after this disgraceful exit.

CHAPTER VII.

"It is difficult to grow old gracefully."

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion all the interim is
Like a phantasma——"

DAD is gone, to be absent for a whole month. It seems impossible to believe it. Never has he left us before, for more than a day or two, at the most. But *a month!* It is an eternity! My eyes are still red with weeping, when a prolonged knock at the hall-door tells us that Aunt Jane Uniacke has arrived.

We all hurry down to receive her, thinking of Dad's last injunction. "Be good to her, girls," said he, "and bear with her all you can, for my sake. And this will give you enough to do," continued he, "for, as a nagger, I don't think she could be beaten this side of Jordan."

She is in the hall now, and all at once I remember

her, though it is so many years since last I saw her. Who could forget that cast-iron face, with its terrible little ringlets on each side of it, that shake and quiver as she speaks, as though they could speak, too, if necessary? Stubbornness is written on each small lineament (Aunt Jane is only five feet high)—and obstinacy, and a determination to *rule*, at all costs. “She who must be obeyed” would have been a fitting title for Miss Uniacke.

“Dear me! and is this Geraldine?” says she in the exasperatingly slow thin voice which nature—who must have hated her long before her birth—has endowed her with. “What a *big* creature! Really, my dear Geraldine, one shivers at the thought of what you *will* be as time goes on. Marry as soon as ever you can, my dear, before you are found out! Men hate fleshy women!”

Already I am boiling with rage. Poor old Geraldine! A terrible retort is on the tip of my tongue, but before I can utter it Kitty steps in. Kitty probably has not liked that allusion to flesh.

“Never mind, Gerry,” says she, with a ringing

little laugh, as innocent as possible ; "we know they hate even more the skinny ones."

Aunt Jane is lean to quite a very remarkable degree. I tremble. Aunt Jane is regarding Kitty steadily.

"Aunt Jane, no doubt, is right ; but there is one comfort for her," says Geraldine politely, with such a terrible politeness, indeed, that once again I shiver in my shoes for what may be coming, "my *vastness*"—bitterly—"need not affect *her* in any way !"

"There you are wrong, my dear," says Miss Uniacke. "And, by the way, let me remind you, that to talk *at* a person who is present is very bad manners."

Here she begins to divest herself of her wraps, in which she is absolutely swathed, although the month is June and the day as hot as a burning sun can make it. We have taken her into the drawing-room, and she is now tossing her outside garments broadcast upon the chairs and ottomans. I do hate people who undress themselves all over the house !

"You are altogether wrong," says she, laying her embroidered dolman on our best chair. "*I* am your aunt : *you* are my niece. I object to monstrosities !"

She turns calmly to Kitty.

"And is this Kitty?" says she, putting up her eyeglass and surveying Kitty from head to foot with a leisurely air. "H'm! Geraldine tall, Kitty small. The long and the short of it. And the 'stout of it,' I *might* have said. No wonder, my dear, you shied so decidedly at my remark about the prejudice men have against fleshy women. A porpoise, my poor girl! A perfect porpoise! Heavens! what delightful names they would invent for you at Scarborough. I go there next month, and shall describe you. However,"—with a serene sigh—"we are all as Heaven made us—some porpoises, some"—with a malignant glance—"skinny—as you have so graphically said!" She turns round sharply. "There was another of you, wasn't there?"

Her glance falls on hapless me.

"Save us!" cries she. "Is that Molly! That long-legged thing! Why, she gave *some* promise of beauty when last I saw her. Oh, no; this, this *can't* be Molly. Some peasant's child, perhaps. A may-pole! A mere twig! Without form and void! No

adornment of any kind! And what's the matter with your eyes, child?" staring at my poor eyes, worn out with crying after my Dad. "Weak, eh?—They look positively *red*! A modern Leah, I declare! Some terrible disease, no doubt. How *fatal* to your prospects. My experience has taught me that, much as men despise fleshy and"—with another scathing glance at Kitty, who comes up behind it smiling—"skinny women, they still more dislike those with tender lids. There was but one man on earth who ever admired them, his name, as you may possibly remember, was Jacob; and by all accounts he was *driven* to his admiration—besides which he was a born idiot. Good gracious, child"—regarding me with surprised scorn—"how you have deteriorated, and they always said you might be good-looking, though I confess *I* had my doubts—well-founded, now certainly."

Here she throws her Paris bonnet on to the afternoon tea-table.

"And so your father has had to leave home," she says; "flying before his debts, eh? Gone to borrow

money to pay them, eh? A poor look-out, eh?"

"You seem wonderfully well-informed," says Geraldine. "We had not heard of that."

"Hadn't you?"—contemptuously—"so much for the confidence that exists between your father and you. So *like* him to hide up everything till the last moment. Deception, *I* call it. He's gone away, at all events. You can't deny that. I only hope he may soon return!"

At this point she removes her soft feather boa and lays it on the top of the piano.

"Wouldn't you like to come up to your room?" asks Geraldine coldly. It is really more than one can bear to see her strewing our poor old drawing-room with her hateful garments—the room that though now desperately shabby is still the delight of our lives. "It is so much nicer to take off one's things in one's room."

"Presently, presently," says she, with an airy lift of her arm. "And so your father has sold everything on the estate, I hear?"

"You have heard what is not true," cry I abruptly.

"He has sold his own hunter, nothing else. His hunter that he loved. Blueskin! He has sold nothing else."

"So Leah has found her voice," says our aunt. "And so Leah's father has sold his hunter! Horrible calamity!"

She changes her bantering tone that is even more detestable than her ordinary one. "And quite right, too!" says she, thrusting out her chin. "What right has a man like Terence O'Connor to *have* a hunter—a pauper like him? Why it would be defrauding you girls of your rights."

"He has defrauded us of *nothing*," says Kitty. I look at her. For the first time in all her life I see her pretty colour desert her. She is pale as death itself. Truly she does love Dad as well as any of us. She looks fierce now as a young tigress—so fierce that one can imagine all her pretty claws out.

"Of nothing!" says Aunt Jane. She sends a sweeping glance round her. It seems to take in the whole room—all its shabbiness, all its little wants—all (and this is the worst) our endeavours to cover up the

wants ; endeavours that are, alas ! so fruitless, yet so loving. Watching her air of contempt as she gazes at our dear old room I could have sobbed aloud. I declare, even yesterday, we had been (in a foolish way) proud of it ; but her slow, cruel glance has laid bare to us the utter poverty of it.

“Of nothing,” says she again, with a sneer. “No doubt you are in affluent circumstances ! One can judge of it by your surroundings. Now look at this room ; is it not a picture of what racing and cards can do ?”

“Father neither races nor plays cards,” say I ; I pause ; my heart is in my mouth ; I feel as if tears are very near me, and then all suddenly something else very far from tears seizes upon me, and I find myself facing this horrible old woman, with parted lips and angry eyes. “How *dare* you talk of father like that !” cry I. “How dare you ! He is the best, the kindest, dearest in the world ! You don’t understand him—you—you *couldn’t*, you aren’t capable of it—he——”

“Tut, tut,” says Aunt Jane, with a wave of her hand. “Don’t be an ass, my dear. Anyway, even

you must admit that your immaculate father has brought himself to a pretty pass *this* time. By-the-bye, Miss Spiteful," addressing me, "he has sent me here to take charge of you all in his absence. And"—with a malicious glance round—"I shall see that I fulfil my engagement. He has given me *carte blanche* to keep you in order." She smiles. "I shall be faithful to my trust. I *shall* keep you in order."

"I assure you, Aunt Jane, we are neither savages nor convicts," says Geraldine.

"Aren't you?" says Aunt Jane; "it is foolish to take one's word for anything. If one did, half the criminals in the world would be now free to perpetrate fresh crimes. Of course I know you are not savages, but there are undeveloped convicts in many climes—more than are ever dreamt of; and——" She pauses. "Well, I hope you will not prove convicts," says she, agreeably. "In the meantime, as your father wishes it, whilst I am here, I shall see that you conduct yourselves with propriety."

"Aunt Jane!" begins Geraldine, with a little catch in her throat.

But Aunt Jane declines to hear her ; she waves her aside.

"I am quite alive to the whole matter," says she. "Your father knows I have so many thousands in the Funds, and he thinks by getting me here to look after you I shall very likely leave those thousands to one of you ; but"—with a detestable laugh—"that's as it *may* be. In the meantime, I don't object to doing him a good turn. I'll look after you. I'll see that you behave yourselves !" She pauses, and glares at us one after the other. "Now, remember," says she, sternly, "that *I* am the head of the house until your father's return. I shall see to and arrange *everything*."

She ceases. For a full minute there is complete silence. We are all choking with rage and grief. Geraldine is the first to recover.

"As our mother's sister," begins she with tremendous dignity, "we——"

"No stage airs for me," says Aunt Jane promptly. "Airs of that sort are out of date. Don't be a fool, my good girl. As your unfortunate mother's sister, I often warned her how it would be if she married your

father, and I shall rule this household as I like until your father's return. For that purpose I have been brought to this,"—with another glance round her—"to this ramshackle place, from my own comfortable home. And now,"—with a cold, forbidding glance at each of us in turn—"one word for all! I passed through the town called Clonbree this morning on my way here. There I heard of the arrival of a new detachment of soldiers—Hussars, I think they called them—young men of notoriously bad character, as far as I could gather. Hear me now!" She rises from the chair on which she has seated herself, and extends her forefinger towards us: "Remember," says she with as much mystery as though she were a modern Charles I., "remember that I forbid you to philander with these immoral young men. That I shall allow no gallivanting with them of any sort. Your father has placed me in charge of you. A first sign of sense in him ever yet shown. You hear?"

"We hear," says Geraldine slowly. Then—"Have a cup of tea, Aunt Jane?"

To offer her a cup of tea in those calm accents!

If it had been a cup of poison, now ! But Geraldine is full of resources ; she certainly disconcerts our Aunt Jane.

“Not down here,” says she. “I’ll have my tea in my room, please. By the bye, where *is* my room ?”

“It is the best room in the house,” says Geraldine.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” says our aunt rising. “The best room, you say ? I had a *hole* when last I was here.”

“You had the blue room then, I think,” says Geraldine, still controlling her temper, though her eyes are flashing. “A very good room as we regard it, but we are not acquainted with palaces. Let me show you to your room now.”

“Ha ! In a hurry to be rid of me,” says Aunt Jane—emanating so solemn a truth that we all refrain from contradicting her.

Geraldine takes her upstairs, but returns immediately, at which we all begin to talk at once.

“What a *beast* she is,” cries Kitty.

“More than that—a demon !” Decidedly—“She won’t let us go anywhere. Did you hear how she

spoke about the officers in Clonbree? And there's Friday's tea—and all. . . . What *are* we to do, Gerry?"

"Go!" says Gerry.

"Oh! that's easier said than done. You see how *she* regards it; and if we disobey her, Dad will be so sorry."

"That's it," says Kitty. "Dad will be vexed. If it weren't for Dad we could defy her as nicely as possible. As it *is*" She pauses, and her pretty face grows desolate. "We are evidently going to have a real good old time with Aunt Jane," says she, her vocabulary beginning already to be much enriched since her acquaintance with our Cousin Paddy.

"I tell you we shall go," says Geraldine, "it is only a mile from this. We all know Slane Wood. We shall get there, and back again before Aunt Jane even dreams about our being out of the way."

"Delightful," cries Kitty, recovering her spirits.

"Oh! If Aunt Jane were to find us out," exclaim I, "she would never forgive us; she would write to

Dad—she”—solemnly—“would cut us out of her will.”

“A fig for her will,” says Kitty, who, I can see plainly, is going to meet Paddy Burke on Friday, were all creation to cry nay. “I don’t believe if we sat here twiddling our thumbs for the whole month of her visit she would leave us a farthing. She perfectly *hates* us. Did you hear how she spoke to us?”

“She certainly *can* give ‘the bastinado with her tongue,’” quotes Geraldine.

“It’s my belief,” says Kitty, “that she wanted to marry Dad herself, and because he wouldn’t have her she has a spite to him that will last her to her dying day. It would be abject folly to give up this gipsy tea in view of her leaving us her horrid money. Look here—I’ve got sixpence left, and I’ll bet you she dies without leaving us even as much as that.”

“She looks capable of anything,” say I, gloomily.

“Her manners leave a good deal to be desired, it must be confessed,” says Geraldine. “But”—doubtfully—“she is as good as God made her, I *suppose!*”

"And oftentimes a great deal worse!" quote I, angrily. "May-pole, indeed!"

At this we all laugh.

"Whoever benefits by her will, *you* won't," says Kitty. "But never mind her now. It is decided, is it not, that we meet Fanny in Slane Wood at four o'clock on Friday?"

"Weather permitting, ' *and if D. V. permit,* '" second I gaily.

"Come along girls, let us look up our frocks," says Gerry.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Beauty, like ice, our footing does betray.
Who can tread sure on the smooth, slippery way?
Pleased with the passage, we glide swiftly on
And see the dangers which we cannot shun.”

SUCH a heavenly afternoon! All sunshine, and blue sky, and dainty flecks of silvery cloud here and there. We have lunched; we have watched Aunt Jane carefully upstairs to her usual afternoon siesta, and now have sallied forth by the back garden on our way to Slane Wood.

We are a little late, but not *very*; and our steps are fleet as Atalanta's own, and our hearts burn high within our bosoms. As indeed why should they not? Two things we have achieved, calculated to fill any breast with rapture: we have done Aunt Jane for once, and we are hastening towards a gipsy tea—where we shall meet our new acquaintances. Kitty

seems specially filled with light and sweetness this afternoon. Lightly she gathers the pale pink dog-roses that adorn the hedges on either side, and slips them into the bosom of her still paler pink linen gown. She sings, she laughs, she calls to us.

"Hurry you two—hurry! We shall *never* be there."

What on earth *is* the matter with Kitty? I ponder over her behaviour for a while, and then I put the above question into words, and ask a solution of it from Gerry.

"She is in love," says Geraldine disgustedly. "In love with that ugly Paddy Burke, who hasn't a sou! Yet look at her! She seems quite happy. *Too* happy. Does she ever *think*?"

"*Never!*" say I, with conviction. "And that's what makes her so charming."

"Still, one should think," says Geraldine, thoughtfully.

Now we are on the outer edge of Slane Wood; we leave the dusty way and dive into the recesses of it—delicious after the hot walking on the tiresome

road. Here, in merry June, the trees are at their best. Some pale in tint, some dark, some sombre to a fault, and some a "glad light green," as old Chaucer has it. That "glad" is so pretty! Now and again through the spaces comes a glimpse of meadows, and the scent of the clover, and the nods of the tall white daisies—I never can bear to call them "marguerites." And sometimes we hear the mournful rippling of a stream, and sometimes the swift rushing of birds above our heads,

And now all at once we come upon the open space explained to us, and we see forms flitting to and fro, and Fanny, a very central figure, hovering over a basket, and now Sir Willoughby, who, because of his great height, towers above them all.

Seeing us, Fanny runs forward, throwing a little word behind her as she does so. The word is meant for Sir Willoughby and Mr. Dickenson, apparently, because they follow her immediately.

"You are late, you children," cries Fanny. "But never mind! We are *so* glad you have come. We had a dreadful thought about you, that perhaps Aunt

Jane had caught you and locked you up in the underground cellar with dry bread and water to sustain you."

"We were preparing a 'surprise party' for Aunt Jane," says Paddy Burke, who has come up panting, but smiling, by this time, and has at once attached himself to Kitty. "We'd have dug you out of the cellar, if it came to the worst, and our smooth entreaties had been of no avail. The result probably would have been a night in the lockup ; but what is that when honour calleth ?"

"What, indeed," says Kitty. "She's asleep, however. We could almost hear her snoring as we left the hall door. All that remains to us now is to pray she may not awaken too soon. I suggested chloral to Gerry, but she lacks firmness."

"I thought you were *never* coming," says Sir Willoughby to me, holding the hand I gave him considerably longer than most people do.

"Oh ! we were *longing* to come," say I, shyly. Sir Willoughby looks bigger and uglier to-day, and I can't bear having my hand held like that. Still, I

am so delighted at finding myself at an actual *party*, that I can't be unkind to any one.

I walk on, Sir Willoughby beside me. I can see that Geraldine has gone up the slope with Mr. Dickenson, and as for Kitty, it would, indeed, be a deaf person who could not hear Kitty and our cousin as they go. The wood resounds with their mirth.

Two or three people besides the men I mention had followed Fanny—people we used to know well a year or two ago, but who had rather drawn back from us when fortune began to fail us. Rich people, but not altogether old family. *Now*, they seem to be glad to see us again, just because Fanny is rich, I suppose, and well married and irreproachable in every way. Such people make me *ill*. However, I accept their greetings politely enough, rewarded afterwards by Fanny, who touches my elbow and whispers to me.

“Snobs, child, snobs. But they make up the sum of life. And no doubt you will live long enough to requite them. To be *indifferent* to people such as

these, shows the highest breeding." I begin to be quite fond of Fanny.

We have all now congregated round the gipsy fire over which the kettle is hanging. The fire, as usual, refuses to light. There is a general rush for brambles and dry sticks. Here, as might be expected, Paddy is a bright and shining light, and Sir Wiloughby, I confess, should not be left out of it. If smudged cheeks and burnt fingers have anything to do with it he is in the foremost grade. And when at last he emerges from the fray, with smoke-filled eyes and dirty face, I cannot refrain from paying him a compliment or two, in spite of his strange appearance. For one thing, even the smudges do not make him uglier than he is already through mother Nature's work.

"Here, the kettle is boiling ! Come away now," say I, laying my hand upon his arm, and drawing him from the fire. "Only for you I don't believe it ever *would* have boiled."

Rather to my dismay he lays his hand impulsively on mine—the one I have placed upon his arm—and

presses it warmly. All the O'Connors have pretty hands, and my right one feels for the moment lost in that huge embrace. What hands *he* has !

I grow very red, and he, after a second, looks distinctly ashamed of himself, and almost flings my poor hand away.

"You're too good," says he confusedly. "I'm the most worthless fellow alive. It was Burke who boiled that kettle, not I. If it depended upon me, it would be at starting-point just now. All I can do is to get filthy," looking at his hands (if he could *only* look at his face !), "and—and annoy the one person on earth whom I would rather die than offend."

7 "Offend?" falter I.

"Why, you," says he, blundering as usual. He could so easily have got out of it. And really I, for my part, hadn't thought so tragically of it as all this comes to. "Of course I know I had no right to touch your hand like that, but when you laid it on my arm. . . . It was no excuse, of course; and I beg your pardon."

"Oh, you needn't," cry I eagerly, quite sorry for him. You never saw anybody so upset as he looks. "I—I didn't mind *at all*, really! Not a bit! Here—just to show you"—stretching out my hand to him—"you may hold it again if you like."

"Oh, no!" says he; but even as he says it he takes my hand and holds it firmly, and looks at me in a queer sort of way, as if he wants to say something but doesn't know how, or is afraid or something. He looks frightful with that black blotch over his nose, yet I can see that he is unhappy, and so to reassure him I give his hand a vigorous squeeze and then drop it.

"Come for a walk," I say. "Come with me. I know where there is a dear little lake just round that corner where you can wash yourself and make yourself all right again."

Obediently he follows me. We skirt the surrounding company—one or two of the girls casting swift glances at me as we go—and after awhile we reach my lake, a delicate little bit of water sunk between huge rocks on one side, and soft grassy slopes on the

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other, and here I advise him once more to wash and be clean.

"Well, certainly they *are* dirty," says he, looking at his hands. "I don't believe, without soap, I shall be able to do much with them."

"Your hands," cry I. "Your hands are nothing. Look at your face!"

"My face!"

"It is nothing but smudges. It is—as dirty as ever it can be. You," with a little impressible laugh, "you look like a sweep!"

"Oh, I *say*!" says he, and instantly goes down on his knees and seeks for his image in the water. Whatever he sees there terrifies him, evidently, as he forthwith plunges his head into the little lake and begins to scrub his ugly features with might and main—and a pocket handkerchief. He takes two or three of these headers before he feels satisfied, and presently looks up at me like a great big shamed schoolboy.

"How am I now?" asks he.

"Better, *much* better," cry I; "please don't wash yourself any more, or there won't be any of you left."

You look quite clean, really! Except—there—over the eyebrow! just stoop a little and I'll make it all right."

He stoops towards me. I dab delicately at the last remaining smudge, and now bending back, survey him anxiously with bent brows and a careful eye. Yes. He is all right now.

It is a simple matter to travel from an eyebrow to an eye. I take the journey in no time; and having reached my destination, I stop there, fascinated. There is something in Sir Willoughby's eyes that is altogether new to me—that bewilders me. Then all at once light breaks upon me! Instinctively the truth becomes clear, and I *know* what has happened to him. *He is in love with me!*

I am not sure whether my first feeling is astonishment or overwhelming pride. But there is no mistake about the second. It is fear, pure and simple. I don't suppose I am the only girl in the world who knew all at once that the first man who loved her *did* love her (it is awfully hard to put it), but at all events I *know* now; I haven't a doubt in my mind

about it, and a raging anger against the earth that it won't open and swallow me up is my *third* feeling. It isn't as if it had *never* done it, one might forgive it then, but as it is——

And he is looking frightful ! His hair, on account of the late scrubbing, is all on end. His cheeks, for the same reason, are crimson. His nose—well, it too, has suffered. One must not be too hard. Only his eyes (and though they are small to a painful degree I will admit that they have a certain charm of their own—a charm called honesty)—only his eyes redeem him, looking into mine as they do (and as I wish they would *not*) with all the fondness of a hundred lovers.

“Molly,” says he, catching my hand again (he could not have been so really ashamed of himself that last time as I *believed*), “Molly, you would not do *that* if you did not like me, would you ?”

“Do what ?” say I. “If you mean trying to make you look clean, yes, I should. I—I would do that for *anybody*.”

“Oh, don't say that,” entreats he, miserably ; and

then in a lower tone, "For all that you *do* like me, don't you?"

"Yes—yes," say I. "Oh, yes, I like you."

"You like me, and I—I love you, Molly. Did you guess that? I love you with all my heart and soul, and I never loved any other woman before. I can swear that. Are you angry with me—are you——"

"Oh, what *nonsense* it all is," interrupt I, looking anxiously from right to left and back again, in the vain hope of seeing some one of our party, "you only saw me once—you *can't* mean what you say, and besides——"

"Don't go on," says he, hurriedly. "Give me a chance. I do mean what I say. I know I should not have spoken so soon. I can see that you are offended. But if you only knew how——"

"I know enough!" cry I, putting up both my hands. "I don't want to know anything more *for ever*. But I'm not offended. I'm—I'm only frightened." I stop and struggle wildly with myself, but the final touch of ignominy has descended upon

me. I burst into tears! "I want to go back to the others," sob I, vehemently.

"Then you shall! Don't cry, Molly! Don't, *darling!* I'll be silent—I'll wait—Molly! Do you want to drive me out of my mind?"

Well, I suppose I don't (not that I think he has much mind to go out of), because suddenly I check my tears, and endeavour to grow calm again. The awful thought that I shall have to return to the others with the signs of woe writ large upon my face, has occurred to me, and actually terrified me into composure.

It is my turn to seek assistance from the lake now. I cool my eyes with the water, and presently look up at my companion with a very depressed attempt at a smile.

"It is I who must ask *you* now how I am looking," say I, my voice a little shaky still.

"You are looking lovely!" says he, promptly, which, after all, is just the idiotic sort of answer that I might have known I should get from him.

I turn away with a somewhat pettish shrug of my shoulders, and, putting my hat as well over my face as I can, march back in silence to the others.

CHAPTER IX.

“Fate steals along with ceaseless tread,
And meets us oft when least we dread;
Frowns on the storm with threatening brow,
Yet in the sunshine strikes the blow.”

PROVIDENTIALLY they are all so taken up with some engrossing topic of conversation that they take little or no notice of my approach. The tea has been made, and Fanny, standing with a teapot uplifted in her hand, is talking with all her might. The words “dance”—“ball-room”—“this day fortnight”—“decorations”—meet our ears.

“What is it all about?” exclaim I. Forgetting my late skirmish, I look anxiously up at Sir Willoughby

“I expect they are talking about our dance,” says he.

“Your *dance*?” Dances, I need hardly remark, are few and far between in our corner of the globe.

“Yes; Friday—this day fortnight. We decided on

it last night. A lot of our fellows are coming down from Cork for it. We're quartered in Cork, you know."

I hadn't known, and it doesn't seem of any importance, now that I do know. A dance! Those words alone have held me. A dance! At Clonbree, in a fortnight, and we shall not be allowed to go to it! I hurry forward.

Every one is chatting gaily about it. Every one here, it seems, is going to it, except we three! We shall get a card, of course—we shall gaze at it—we shall weep over it—we shall say "No" to it! Kitty, I can see, is looking very downcast, although Paddy is sitting beside her, helping her to cake right generously—indeed, if he is helping her as he loves her, he must be a hopeless victim to her charms. As I watch her she looks up, and as our eyes meet she gives me a dismal little nod, and I can see that tears are not far from her pretty blue eyes. I return that nod in kind, and glance sympathetically round to find Geraldine, who naturally is feeling quite as miserable as we are.

At first I can't see her anywhere, and indeed it is her

laugh that betrays her. Yes, she is *laughing*. She is sitting behind a big elm tree with Mr. Dickenson beside her, and is evidently enjoying herself immensely. I begin to think Gerry is made of stronger stuff than I imagined if she can thus give way to mirth, with an overwhelming disappointment in front of her; but some of her conversation floating towards me so fills me with astonishment that I forget my honourable instincts and listen *hard*.

“Oh ! I don’t see how I can promise you *all* the waltzes,” she is saying with a brilliant smile at her little soldier, who is lounging at her feet, and toying with her tea-cup. “The first, if you like, and the third, and, perhaps, the seventh——”

Here Fanny calls me to take a place beside her, and like one in a dream I obey her ! Good heavens ! what *can* Geraldine mean ? She who *knows* our Aunt Jane ! If it means defiance of that awful old woman, it means madness, too, and an end to all our hopes of inheriting her money ; and, besides, we had promised Dad not to annoy her in any way.

“Sit down, sit down !” whispers Fanny, affection-

ately catching the end of my skirt, and pulling me down beside her. "I know how you and Kitty are feeling, but I have a *plan*! No, Sir Willoughby, you need not go away, I can move round a little bit, and," beaming at him, in spite of an angry nudge I give her, "there will be plenty of room for us all."

"I think you needn't have done *that*," say I, in a low tone, with a reproachful glance.

"Why shouldn't I?" says she, arching her brows. "I suppose you think he belongs to you, you conceited baby! Well, he doesn't; he belongs to me. I love him. I can't get on without him. He is the handsomest man in the world. Don't you think so?"

"Pouf!" say I. "The ugliest, you mean!"

"Pouf, yourself! 'Handsome is as handsome does.' I suppose you are not so far advanced as to deny the truth of that old proverb? And Sir Willoughby does handsomely whatever he does. He has a heart of gold, I can tell you. But about this dance! When tea is over I wish you three would manage to stay with me, under pretense of helping me to pack up, and we'll have a real talk about it."

"It will be 'All cry and little wool,'" whisper I back disconsolately. "There is another proverb in exchange for yours. You say you believe in them."

"Little wool!" cries she. "There will be a golden fleece, I tell you."

I never met a woman with such good spirits, such a turn for finesse, and yet with such a good heart. Perhaps high spirits make a good heart. "A merry heart goes all the way," says the dearest of all men, who must himself have had a "merry heart," I think, in spite of everything. The light-hearted person seldom broods, and it is brooding that leads to most bad actions. Fanny shows her diplomatic powers by getting rid of everybody five minutes after tea is done, with the exception of we three, Paddy Burke, who, as her brother, has naturally stayed to help her (though afterwards I could not remember where the help came in), Mr. Dickenson, who begged to be allowed to stay, and Sir Willoughby, who wouldn't go away. Perhaps Fanny had not exercised her taste for finesse with them.

"Now, what about this dance?" begins Fanny. "I

know what you are all afraid of—our dear Aunt Jane!”

“Yes; she will *never* give us permission,” says Kitty.

“You call on her, Fanny!” says Paddy, anxiously. “Say you’ll chaperone them, say you’ll chaperone the old girl herself; *that* might flatter her!”

“It is easy to see you don’t know her,” says Kitty, dolefully. “*Nothing* would move her! not even flattery!”

“She must be far gone, indeed, at that rate!” says Paddy Burke.

“Am I to understand, once for all,” says Fanny, getting up a business-like air, “that no representations, no entreaties, could move her to give her consent to your coming to this dance?”

“You may indeed understand that,” say I.

“Then, now listen to me!” says Fanny. “Don’t for a moment think that I would urge you to disobey any one in *real* authority over you—not if they were the most unreasonable people in the world. I mean that if your father was here I should not say a second

word if he forbid you to come to our dance, though that is outside the matter altogether, as I know Uncle Terence would come himself, and bring you girls with him. But with regard to Aunt Jane's forbidding you to enjoy yourselves in a rational manner, I call that nothing less than *tyranny*!" She looks round, "What do you all call it?" says she, appealing to the men.

"Tyranny indeed!" says Mr. Dickenson.

"It is inconceivable!" says Sir Willoughby.

"She must be a regular old cat!" says Paddy Burke.

Mr. Burke brings down the house!

"I *do* love you Paddy," says his sister. "Yes she is! She is all that, and a great deal more!"

"And now listen to me, children," speaking to us. "You have the steward's wife, Mrs. Moriarty, living near you. She, I know, is devoted to you all. Hire that invaluable, if slightly erratic, person who drove you to see me the other day——"

"We need not do that," says Geraldine. It is the first time she has spoken. She had been silent dur-

ing the protestings of Kitty and me against our chances of ever going to this dance. "We have the old mare, and once we get to Clonbree—to your house"—looking at our cousin.

"You have caught on," says Fanny, who really is a little, a *very* little slangy. "You will start with Mrs. Moriarty alone—supposing our beloved aunt refuses to accompany you—and you will come to our house; and, after that, Jack and I will take you to the rooms."

"Oh, no! It is impossible, Gerry," say I, addressing myself to Geraldine.

"I wonder you can't *see* that, Gerry," says Kitty.

"See what?" asks Fanny. "Mrs. Moriarty, as I say, can bring you to my house. Can wait for you there till the dance is over, and bring you safely back to Ballinahinch. It is quite proper."

"And Aunt Jane——"

"Well, what of her? What could she say? If she refuses to take you, she still cannot find fault at my chaperonage—her own niece."

"She will refuse to let us go under any chaperon-

age. She objects to—dancing—to amusement of any kind—to *everything*. She *hates* us, I think," says Kitty miserably. "Oh! why did Dad go away just now."

"Why don't you write to him and get his permission to go to this dance?" asks Paddy Burke eagerly.

"Because—because we *know* he would refuse us nothing, and because we know, too, that he would be wretched in that—that he had offended Aunt Jane."

"But why wretched?" asks Sir Willoughby of me.

"Because Aunt Jane has money to leave, and we—well," stonily, "we have no money at all. Like most Irish landlords we are ruined because of the lowering of the rents, and Dad—it is for our sake, you will understand"—looking at him piteously—"Dad is afraid of offending Aunt Jane!"

"Oh! I *see*! Oh! by Jove! What's to be done?" says he.

What indeed!

"Nothing!" return I with the calmness that is popularly supposed to accompany despair.

CHAPTER X.

"Come and trip it as you go
On the light fantastic toe "

"Now slowly soft let Lydian measures move,
And breathe the pleasing pangs of gentle love."

WE have got home—we have been interviewed by Aunt Jane ; she has learned from us that we have been for a long walk in the woods, and she has been satisfied. If she had *not* been satisfied. If she had regularly found us out and given us a thorough good scolding, I do not think we should have felt so altogether miserable and downhearted, and deceitful, as we do, when we go upstairs to take off our things. However, there is no time to unburden ourselves, each to each, as Aunt Jane is expecting us to the late dinner she has insisted on since her arrival. Poor darling Dad had discovered (through Geraldine, it must be confessed ; he seldom discovered economies

of his own accord) that early dinner made luncheon impossible, and though he hated dining before eight o'clock, he gave in, like the hero he is.

We get through this dinner respectably enough, and now, *now* at long last, we find ourselves alone in the dim recesses of Geraldine's chamber.

I say "dim" right seriously. The melancholy composition candle that adorns the centre of the rickety gipsy table that stands behind Gerry's bed is all the light we have. We are accustomed to it, however, and therefore it makes our already too low spirits—at all events, no lower! We are all three seated on the orthodox bedroom chair—not all on *one* chair, of course, there are three of them—the thing with four long legs, two rails to the back, and unlimited rungs—the most uncomfortable chair in the world! But discomfort seems to be our portion!

"It *is* hard lines," says Kitty, who, as I have already said, has been cultivating Paddy Burke of late.

"Yes, isn't it?" say I, eagerly. "How I should

like to go ! And all the others will be going. Only we three girls will have to stay at home. It's wicked."

"That's just how I feel," says Kitty. "Oh, it is worse than wicked ; it is *cruel*. But—how *can* we go?"

"We might go in *spite* of her, of course," say I. "She could not, I suppose, prevent our going if it came to manual force. She could not tie us to the bedposts, for example."

"No. But she would be furious all the same, and we have promised Dad to be good to her, and you know how unhappy it would make him if we defied her."

"True, true," say I. "Yet, mark my words, she won't leave us one penny. All will go to hospitals and things, to save her soul."

"As if *her* soul was worth anything," says Kitty.

"It's so grimy," cry I, bursting out laughing, "that she's afraid to die without whitewashing it."

"Don't grow bitter over her, Molly," says Geral-

dine. It is the first time she has spoken. "She isn't worth it."

"I wish Dad hadn't put us on our honour," says Kitty, restlessly. "He *did*, didn't he?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Only"—sighing—"I wish, like you, he *hadn't*."

"I suppose there is no way out of it," says Kitty. "Oh! when all those girls were talking to-day about going to it, and discussing their frocks and their partners, I felt—well," a tear stealing out of her pretty eyes, "I don't know *how* I felt, but it was bad, *very* bad."

"That was just how *I* felt," exclaim I, slipping my arm round her neck, and giving her a good hug. "And even the *frocks*—*they* need not have troubled us. Those white Indian muslins we wore at the McGillicuddy's last year would do beautifully. But, what's the good of thinking about it? It is impossible. Impossible," with a thrill of sharp despair. I throw up my unhappy head, and in so doing my glance falls on Geraldine. Her supreme calmness under our common affliction maddens me. "Gerry!

why don't *you* speak?" cry I, "why don't you say something? Isn't it *dreadful* that we can't go?"

There is a little pause. Geraldine looks up at us.

"*I* m going!" says she.

There is a long, long pause, and then—

"What?" say I. It is hardly an eloquent remark, but it is all I am equal to just now.

"Yes, what?" cries Kitty, waking up. "What do you mean, Gerry?"

"Just what I say," says Gerry, nonchalantly.

"Fiddlesticks! You've got to explain," says Kitty, indignantly. "Here, get up off that footstool, and tell us all about it."

"Why should I get up?" says Geraldine. "I'm as good here as there. Let me rest, I'm tired; and I can, as you say, tell you all about it as eloquently on this lowly seat as on a throne."

"You had better tell us at once," says Kitty, her whole air threatening. "You have got some scheme in your head, my good child, we can *see*; but if you think you can carry it out *alone*—if you dream you can go to this dance without *us*, 'proudly loney'—

without your lovely sisters, I mean, you are mightily mistaken, that's all!"

"*Who* said I was going without you?" says Geraldine fiercely—she seems really offended. "Is thy servant a *sneak*? There is but one thing to be considered, and that is—have you the *courage* to follow in my steps?"

"You *have* some idea then, Gerry?" cry I. "Oh, go on, tell us about it. *Do* go on."

We lean forward. We give our four ears to Gerry. Her plan, in effect, is nothing more than Fanny's. Mrs. Moriarty is to be pressed into the service. We are not to offend Aunt Jane at any cost; that would mean breaking our promise to Dad. We are to wait until Aunt Jane goes to bed, *then* we are to step out into the night, to meet Mrs. Moriarty and Dan (now, alas! our one groom), and so to vanish from Ballinahinch until the next morning.

"If she should find us out," say I.

"She *can't* find us out," says Geraldine, decisively.

"No; really I think she couldn't," says Kitty.

"The whole thing is deceitful, if you like, but there

is one salve for us—if Dad were at home he would let us go—and—well—Dad is our one authority !”

It ends like this : we all give in. Right or wrong, we decide on going to the dance at the Clonbree barracks—terrified at the idea of Aunt Jane’s anger if she finds us out, but justified by the knowledge that if Dad had been at home he would have encouraged us to go to it.

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The fiddles are sounding ! Flowers ! ferns ! and flowers again ! The whole place seems enriched by them. The whole room indeed is as lovely a thing as pretty fingers and strong arms could make it.

A sense of pure delight enters into me as we cross the threshold of the ballroom, Fanny going on before, talking with all her might with Geraldine and Kitty beside her. I, of course, come last of all.

Though last, apparently, I am not *least* ! A step behind me—a hurried one—a voice !

“Miss O’Connor, this dance——”

It is Sir Willoughby.

“Oh ! I am so sorry,” say I, “but I am engaged.

Mr. McGillicuddy asked me for it this moment. He is taking off his coat, I think. I met him in the hall, and——”

“ Well, the next ? ” says Sir Willoughby, earnestly, without a word about the time he has squandered waiting for my coming—which I can see has been considerable—and so altogether in vain. I begin to regret I accepted my first offer. Mr. McGillicuddy, though distinctly handsome, dances like a circus elephant, and perhaps Sir Willoughby—but, after all, *he* looks as if he couldn't dance either.

“ With pleasure,” say I, warmly. “ I'm very sorry about this dance, because——”

“ Because ? ”

“ I should much rather dance with you.”

“ Oh ! do you *mean* that, Molly ? ”

“ Yes ; he is the worst dancer in the county ! ”

“ I see,” says Sir Willoughby. He falls back a bit as he sees Mr. McGillicuddy come up to me. “ You won't forget—the next ? ” says he quickly ; “ and—may I see your card ? ”

“ Yes ; and *keep* it for me,” say I, almost throwing

it to him, as my partner encircles me with his arm, and draws me into a sudden opening in the dancing crowd.

We have been a little late, and the quadrille that seems essential to the opening of a country dance was on before our arrival, therefore a succession of waltzes is now in full swing. My next is with Sir Willoughby, and I learn too late that he is the best dancer in the room. The best, and yet denied me, Unfortunately, in between my dance with Mr. McGillicuddy and him I had engaged myself three deep, so that now if I would I could not give him as many waltzes as he desires ; which, when it comes to it, means every waltz for the evening. This of course might have horrified chaperones or elderly spinsters—but to me, to whom just now I confess dancing is the one good thing to be desired in life, it seems hard lines. Why *didn't* he tell me he danced well at that picnic at Slane Wood and why *did* I say yes to every silly other man who has asked me for a dance.

He and I have danced *this* dance straight through. He had suggested a visit to the improvised conserva-

tory, but I had negatived it emphatically. How could he want to sit down with that band playing that waltz? I daresay he discovered his mistake, because he kept on dancing after that without a murmur.

"Your card," says he, returning it to me when we have come to an angle in the room. "I have dared to put down my name for——"

I look at it. For three others. Three that I have already promised—not knowing.

"Oh ! but I have promised these," say I.

"Have you. *All* of them ! I am very unfortunate."

"Not all," say I. "This one—the thirteenth—I—I kept."

"For *me* ?" eagerly.

"No." I pause—"I don't know *why* I kept it. Only, I think, because I fancied some new person might come, who——"

"I understand," says he, sadly. "Well, there will be no new person I think."

"Of course not," say I, ashamed ; "and——" my face going crimson—"if you would care to have it—I——"

"Thank you," says he, briefly.

I get through all my other dances very successfully. It is only when I find that number thirteen is due that a sudden fear takes hold of me, and I grow somewhat pale and unnerved, and begin to wish myself at home. A futile wish ! Even as it darts through my mind, Sir Willoughby comes up, offers me his arm, and with a sinking heart, I accompany him to the dancing room.

"Would you rather *not* dance?" asks he abruptly.

"If you don't mind," say I ; "I am a little tired. I have been dancing so much——"

"Yes," grimly, "I could *see* that."

"Then you can see all the rest," say I, as lightly as I can, though I confess his whole air and manner is not reassuring. "You can see that I want to get Geraldine to come home as soon as possible."

"Do you mean by that that you want to get rid of me?"

His tone is stern. It brings me to my senses. To be rude—that is terrible ! No, I shall not be rude whatever it costs me !

"That is an uncalled-for remark," say I, a little haughtily. "I meant only that I was tired."

"That only?" says he, indescribable tenderness—most unwelcome tenderness—in his tone. "Come out then. The night is lovely. We need not dance this. Come! and see how the stars are shining; the quiet night will give you rest."

I doubt this! But I go with him nevertheless. It is very hard to say no, twice running!

CHAPTER XI.

“**Love!** I will tell thee what it is to love,
 It is to build with human thoughts, a shrine
Where hope sits brooding like a beauteous dove—
 Where life seems young and like a thing divine,
All tastes, all pleasures, all desires combine,
 To consecrate this sanctuary of bliss ;
 Above the stars in cloudless beauty shine ;
Around the streams their flowery margin kiss,
And if there's heaven on earth, that heaven is surely this !”

OUTSIDE, the gardens are all alight with Heaven's
lamps. Soft as the softest velvet blows the wind.
Pale petals of half dead roses lie on the garden paths,
their dying perfumes making sweet the air, whilst on
every side huge bushes of these best flowers show
themselves—roses, white and red and yellow, all
sleeping with drooping heads, their calices filled
with dew.

The night seems heavy with Nature's richest gifts.
Sky and earth alike are fair. Above—

“The cold chaste moon, the queen of Heaven's bright isles,
 Who makes all beautiful on which she smiles,
 That wandering shrine of soft, yet icy flame,”

is gleaming brilliantly ; casting little cold, clear glances into corners where certainly she has no right to be, and where if she had an ounce of sense she would *know* she was unwelcome. From the little wood over there comes a subdued twittering of birds every now and then—a drowsy twittering that speaks of rest disturbed by the strains of the band that penetrate even here. Low down there, far, far away, one catches a glimpse of the ocean, sleepless, swaying, waiting always. The heavens and it seem to blend, to melt, into one vast, sad, grey, melancholy mist ! Sorrow seems to lie down there, yet all the stars are shining in all the sky.

“You are silent,” says my companion. His voice startles me from my dreaming.

“How lovely it all is !” say I, with a quick sigh.

"I am so glad you got these grounds, for your dance."

"It would have been impossible at the barracks," says he ; "so stuffy, and only the yard. Yes ; this was better."

"This is perfect !" say I, in a low tone.

"Is it ?" He pauses. Then suddenly, "Molly, have you remembered ?"

"Remembered ?"

"What I said to you the other day—that last day we met—in Slane Wood ! How *long* ago it seems !"

"Just a fortnight," say I, cheerfully, though in truth my heart is sinking.

"Ah, to *you* ! But—have you remembered ?"

"Yes, oh, *yes* !" says I, giving a desperate glance towards the house so terribly far away, though only a moment since it seemed quite near ; "I remember. But I think—I—I hope—that you——"

"There isn't the least good in hoping that," says Sir Willoughby, forlornly ; "I shall never cease to love you, if that is what you mean. No"—with a slight allusion to a mumble of mine—"I shall *never* do better, and I don't want to. The question is, will

you try and love me? I'm"—pausing—"an ugly fellow I know, but——" He pauses again, to my consternation. What on earth am I to say.

"Oh, no—no indeed," I cry presently, after what I feel is a most damnatory hesitation. "I"—faintly—"I have seen uglier!"

I have done it *now*, at all events! Mingled with my shame is a sense of comfort. He won't forgive *that* in a hurry. Alas! He *does*!

"That's honest, at all events," says he, with a smile. "You"—earnestly—"are honest, Molly. You must be. You have the honestest face in the world, I think, and the loveliest, and the dearest! Oh! that I could call it mine! And perhaps I shall. You," nervously, "you have not actually refused me yet."

I look up at him. Certainly I *thought* I had. I am about to set this matter at rest once and for ever, but he checks me.

"No; don't say it," says he, quickly. "*Hear* me first! I don't want to bribe you, Molly, but"—some-what shamefacedly—"I—I have some money. I could give you everything you want. I could even

be of service, perhaps, to your sisters——” he breaks off abruptly. “Oh! I must be a *devil* to talk to you like this,” says he. “Don’t mind me, Molly. Forget it all. What I want is, that you should forget that I have *any* money—though—I suppose that means——”

“Don’t talk like that,” interrupt I. “Believe me, I should like you just as well if you had not a penny in the world.”

“Or as ill!”

“No, I like you!”

“You *mean* that?—that you like me as well as most people?” I laugh.

“I don’t know how most people like you,” return I, wilfully misunderstanding. A glance at him, taken surreptitiously, from under my lashes makes me feel ashamed of myself. But one can go good lengths when one wants to stave off the evil hour.

“You know what I mean,” says he, colouring. “You needn’t answer, of course, if you don’t like. But, do you like me as well as you like other fellows?”

“Oh! *quite* as well!” I admit instantly, this

striking me as being a distinctly non-committal sort of reply.

“Do you know you are saying a good deal?” says he quickly—gladly. “You are giving me hope. It is true then,” looking at me, “that you don’t like a single other man better than me?”

There is something in the very earnestness of his expression that raises once again the demon of mischief in me. I had *meant* to be kind to him, but cold—*very* cold—yet now I cannot resist the opening he has offered me.

“Not a *single* one!” reply I, with lowered lids and voice—the voice full of meaning.

“*Molly!*” sharply.

“Well?” innocently.

“What are you saying?”

“What have I *said*?”

“A single man! Am I,” shortly, “to understand that you like a *married* man?”

“Ah! more than that,” say I, hanging my head and sighing, “I—I *love* one!”

“You must be mad!” cries he. “Oh! you *can’t*”

know what you are saying. Here! Turn, let me look at you. That *you* Molly, you—— *Why, you are laughing!*"

"Poor old Dad!" whisper I, looking up at him with saucy lips and eyes. He lays his hands upon my shoulders and gives me a little shake. Such a gentle shake. It disappoints me! If I had had *any* success in my part he should have been more vigorous in his wrath.

"You guessed!" say I, disgustedly.

"No," says he, "I guessed nothing. If it is your pleasure to fool me to the top of your bent, that pleasure will be yours at any time. You are a cruel child, and do you know," sadly, "I think you will bring me only grief, yet I shall never repent the day I met you."

"*Do* you remember that day," interrupt I, trying to repress my mirth, "and Mickey, and the old car, and Mary Kate?"

"I don't remember Miss Mary Kate," says he anxiously. "A—er—*another* sister?"

Here, I regret to say, my mirth is no longer re-

pressed. It occurs to me later that it drowns the strains of the band.

"A sister! No, only Mickey's old horse! *Another* sister! No, thank goodness. There is one too many of us already." I pause—"I'm the one!" say I, nodding my head at him.

"Are you?" says he, his eyes on mine. How I *wish* he wouldn't look at me like that; just as if he thought I was an angel. "I don't know who would part with you, once he had you. Do you know," rather mournfully, "you can't imagine how I envy you. You have your sisters and your father——"

"And my aunt,"—with a little grimace.

"Whilst I," taking no notice of my interruption, "have nobody."

"Nobody?"

"*Literally* nobody. My father died before I was born, my mother when I was born, and I was an only child. My guardian is alive still, but I care as little for him as he does for me. I have a few cousins here and there, but they are all married, and I have not entered into their lives."

"Neither sisters, nor cousins, nor aunts," exclaim I, not frivolously this time. I am really struck with the forlornness of the picture he has presented. "Except the Ancient Mariner," I continue, thoughtfully, "I never heard of any one so lonely."

"Lonely! yes, that is the word," says he. "I *am* lonely. And the curious part of it is"—smiling, but somewhat joylessly—"that I believe I was meant to belong to a big family of brothers and sisters. A father would have been *more* than dear to me, and a mother—— Yet all is denied me. And now—— *now*, when this aching void in my heart grows too strong for me—when I feel that you *alone* can fill it——" He takes one of my hands and holds it between his own. "Molly, darling, take pity on me."

"Oh, you ask *too much*!" cry I, miserably.

"Yes, I do," says he quickly. "I am bribing you again; bribing your *heart* this time. Why should my loneliness compel you to spoil your life? No, no. Let it rest as it is now; but as your heart is free, Molly, do not reject me all at once. Give me time.

I love you. No man—the very handsomest of them all—can do more than that.”

“I suppose not,” say I, vaguely.

“Once you were my wife——”

“Oh ! that is impossible. That is out of the question !” cry I.

CHAPTER XII.

"O! rid me of this torture quickly there,
My madam with the everlasting voice."

"Such a hail of words she has let fall."

WE move towards the house. I, with a sudden eagerness to reach it as soon as possible, Sir Willoughby with reluctant steps. Already the stars have begun to fade, Dian has sunk to sleep. From myriad closes in the deep, sweet wood come tiny twitterings and rustlings, and sudden song-bursts, that proclaim the approach of morn.

Our way takes us past a silent angle, scarcely moonlit at the best of times, and now dull and void of any light. Yet two figures seated within this angle are plain to me, as we go by. That white frock, that pale coral-coloured sash—Kitty alone is mistress of that frock and sash!

And Kitty is sitting here, with somebody beside her—somebody whose arm is round her waist; somebody who has caught her left hand in his; somebody who is evidently pouring impassioned words into her ear.

With a little gasp I catch Sir Willoughby's arm and hurry him forward. Only too late, however; he has seen that coral sash as plainly as I have.

I turn to him. It is better to have it out at once. Not to think about it for days—*for ever*, perhaps.

"You *saw* her?" say I, breathlessly, my face crimson.

"Your sister—yes."

"Oh! how *could* she!" cry I, covering my face with my hands. "Here—and she has known him only for a few days, and—oh!—how *could* she?"

"But why—why?" asks he, quickly. He takes down my hands from my face. "What is there to be ashamed of?" says he. "Haven't you seen—don't you know how fond they are of each other. All the world could see it, I think. . . . *Poor Burke!*"

Suddenly he lets my hands go and throws up his head, and for the first time he speaks bitterly.

"Poor!" says he; "why should I call him poor! At this moment he is the richest man on earth. The woman he loves loves *him*!"

There is a touch of reproach in his tone that crushes me. I hang my head.

"I'm sorry," say I, faintly; "but I can't help it." My tones are muffled, they express the deepest abasement.

In a sort of quiet way he catches the humour of the situation. He laughs a little, and seizing my hand presses it to his lips.

"Oh, Molly, what a child *you* are! And what a darling. There, don't mind me. Why should I trouble you? To-morrow— There is always to-morrow. Come, forget your grief, and let us return to the lights and the music and the ball-room."

These are welcome news. I follow him with undisguised alacrity to where the lights and the music and the dance await us.

As we enter the ballroom once more he looks down at me.

“Are you engaged for this?”

“Yes,” falteringly, and looking helplessly round me for the partner that is nowhere to be seen. “But, as this dance is half through,” and, once again peering east and west, “I can’t see my partner anywhere, I—I expect I shall have——”

“To give it to me,” says he quickly. “You will won’t you?” He hardly waits for the answer; in another moment his arm is round me, and we are swinging lightly up the room.

After all, I am rather glad than otherwise that my *bona fide* partner has not waited for me. Sir Willoughby, as I have already said, or as I should have said, is an ideal dancer. He dances divinely, as well, indeed, as if he had been the handsomest man in Christendom. His step is perfect, his arm is strong and steady, and when dancing with him—a great matter this—one cannot see *his face!*

I am angry with myself a second after this ungenerous thought occurs to me. After all his face if ugly

is a *good* face, quite a *dear* old face in its own way ; and the heart beating beneath the handsome uniform against which I recline is surely the best and truest in the world.

Almost before we get quite round the room I feel sorry that it is out of my power to love dear kind, ugly, Sir Willoughby Heriot !

But then ! He is so ugly !

.

How we get home is a dream never to be forgotten. I say a dream, because in parts it seems imperfect. We all remember being taken away from the ballroom by Fanny, we remember also the start for home with Mickey and Mary Kate, *this* time with a covered car, and Mrs. Moriarty, and we all remember, too, though indistinctly, the drive towards Ballinahinch.

But what is as clear as crystal to us even now is how the first consciousness of dawn—of *day*—came to us as we neared our home. I suppose it was the terror it struck to our hearts that emphasised it. It struck on the old barn that lay just inside the yard gates, and told us that soon the world—*our* world—

would be awake and up again. Aunt Jane is a fatally early riser !

We get down from the car, we bid adieu to Mrs. Moriarty, who tells us "to be careful now, an' kape an eye on the ould lady's windy" (which unfortunately overlooks the yard), and so step noiselessly across the pavement, and down the kitchen steps. The kitchen door is half open.

Softly, softly we push it from us. Slowly, slowly, we descend the steps that lead into it. Geraldine goes first, then Kitty, then I. As Kitty's feet reach the second step they slip, and with a little crash and a smothered cry she comes smartly to the ground. Almost at the same moment the window above is thrown open, and a head, the like of which was never seen before, and which I hope and trust will never be seen again, projects itself into the morning air.

It is the head of Aunt Jane ! So much my petrified eyes tell me ! *Such* an Aunt Jane ! Hitherto I had never seen her devoid of her Parisian finery. And when I do (which is at this moment), the shock is almost more than I can bear.

Her small, lean face is surrounded by the most enormous white frilled cap it has ever been my misfortune to see outside a circus ! It is so big that she looks lost in it—(Oh ! that she *had* been, and *for ever*)—only her long thin nose peers forth, and here and there in a dangling sort of fashion a thin wisp of grey hair. She has evidently taken out her teeth, because her jaws have fallen in (not into the *cap*, into her *her-self*), and her chin, it has grown pointed, *so* pointed. Good gracious ! What a frightful old woman !

Truly ugliness is as fascinating as beauty. My eyes are *glued* to Aunt Jane's face, and alas ! *her* eyes are glued on me ? There is no getting out of it ! Oh, *why* did Kitty fall down that step, *why* has she brought destruction on our head.

"*Ha !*" says Aunt Jane at last. It is hardly a remark ; it is a snort ! I quail beneath it. A desire to run is full upon me, but I feel paralysed, and can only continue to look up and stare and stare at this awful old woman in the frilled cap. So paralysed am I, indeed, that my hands refuse any longer to hold my cloak round me, and it drops to the ground,

leaving me standing here in the bright early morning in my white frock, and with the rising gleams of the sun beating on my naked arms and neck.

“What’s the matter with you?” says Gerry in a soft but piercing whisper, “you look as if you had seen a ghost! Come in, do.”

Evidently I look all I should under the circumstances! Neither Kitty, who has (too late) gathered herself together, or Gerry has seen my apparition; and apparently the snort has gone by them unheard. I try to answer Gerry—to warn her—but I find I can’t; my tongue is cleaving to the roof of my mouth.

“Come in!” cries Kitty, out loud, “or that old cat will see you!”

“*Old cat!*” The words ring clear. The old cat referred to hears them distinctly, and instantly (and *literally*) shows her claws; she stretches out two lean grasping old hands, and, clinging to the window-sill stoops over.

“Who said that!” shrieks she. “Come out here, Kitty! Do you think I don’t know your hideous

treble? Ha! you are afraid, are you? Not *ashamed*, I warrant—there can be no shame left in you—but afraid that you have lost your chances of gaining the ‘old cat’s’ nuggets! Ha!” Her snorts are growing terrible; I am still standing staring at her, my cheeks as white as death. “D’ye think I don’t know—that I don’t understand? You believed you had hoodwinked me, didn’t you? But ‘old cats’ are not easy to blind. I know everything! *Everything*, I tell you. Your disgraceful flight from this house last night—your adventure with your precious cousin” (here I see Kitty clasp her hands on her heart, but Aunt Jane had only meant Fanny)—“and now,” with an ironical laugh that shakes every frill in the frightful cap, “now I am in at the death, as it were!” she cackles loudly. “Oh! this will be a rare tale to tell your father—your ‘darling Dad’—your adored parent!” Here her terrible old eyes fix themselves on me. “Go in out of my sight you wretched, naked girl,” cries she. “Go and put on your clothes! Cover yourself, you wicked creature. Go—*go*, I tell you.”

Horror-stricken, terrified, I fly down the steps,

almost falling into Kitty's arms. I am sobbing, crying, and cling to Kitty.

"Oh ! Kitty ! Oh ! it is all over. Oh ! *what* shall we do ?"

"I'll tell you," says Gerry, calmly. "We shall all go up to my room and get a cup of tea. I'm tired, and so are you—and—don't be a *fool*, Molly !" fiercely. "Do you think she can eat you ?"

"Come, come," says Kitty encircling me with her arm ; and presently we find ourselves in Gerry's room shivering, but safe—for the time being.

"Do put something against the door," entreat I, still sobbing bitterly. "The chest of drawers, Gerry, or the table. Oh ! *do* put something. If she were to come here—*in* here—I should die."

"For goodness' sake be sensible," says Gerry with a little stamp of her foot. "If you keep on crying and howling like an infant, how can we discuss things——"

"Yes, and things are bad enough," says Kitty. "There now. Molly—duddy—*do* take courage."

"Oh, I will," I say, trying valiantly to be calm. "But when I think of Dad—poor Dad—I feel so miserable. She will tell him—not that I mind his knowing, but she will cut us all out of her will, and you know how he has been dwelling on the hopes that she will do something for us."

"It will be a grief to him certainly," says Kitty in a low tone.

"It means *ruin*!" say I, beginning to weep afresh.

"It is unfortunate, certainly," says Geraldine, who is pacing up and down the room as if thinking. "She will beyond all doubt *tell him*. We must be prepared for that. It would be too exquisite a pleasure to deny herself. To make even *one* person unhappy means joy to her. What unmeasurable depths of delight, therefore, will be hers in the knowledge that she has reduced *four* people to despair."

"What's the good of talking like that?" says Kitty, reproachfully.

"Not much, I allow. The only thing I can think of as a set-off to her malignancy, is—to find some good

news for Dad that will counteract the bad." She turns suddenly to me. "You, Molly, *you* can supply it!"

"I! *I!*" say I.

"Yes, *you*."

CHAPTER XIII.

"The lucky have whole days which still they choose,
Th' unlucky have but hours, and those they lose."

.
"Be ready for all changes in thy fortune."

I STARE at her. What *can* she mean? Then all at once I *know*! And my pale cheeks grow crimson, and my wet eyes dry. Dried by the very intensity of the fire that burns my cheeks.

"Oh, no. It is impossible!" I say, moving back from them, and putting out my hands as if to ward off something. "I can't! I *won't*!"

"But why?"

"I don't love him."

"Pooh! A baby like you! You know nothing. And you have plenty of time to love him."

"Yes. And he so *nice*!"

"He *did* propose to you to-night, Molly?"

"It isn't any good your denying it, because anyone could see it in his face."

"And in yours, too!"

"Go on, Molly," says Kitty, impatiently. "He *did* ask you to marry him?"

"Yes," confess I in a low tone, thus driven to bay.

"And you?" breathlessly from both.

"I refused him!"

"Good heavens! What fools there are on earth," says Geraldine, lifting hands and eyes. "You refused him! You, a penniless child—and he a baronet, with thousands a year. I must say," wrathfully, "you are the most selfish girl I ever heard of."

"Selfish?"

"Yes, did you ever think of us, of *Dad*?"

I feel overwhelmed with remorse on the spot. No, I had not thought of Dad, of *anyone* but myself when I refused Sir Willoughby.

"It is not too late yet," says Kitty, "if he loves her he will ask her again. And—I would not ask you to marry him, ducky," says she, "if I knew he

was horrid in *any* way, but Sir Willoughby *is* so good all round."

"He—he's so *ugly*!" say I, faintly.

"Ugly! He is handsome," says Geraldine, solemnly. "*Any* man with ten thousand a year *must* be handsome."

"Well, *he* isn't," say I, rebelliously.

"I acknowledge he is not a modern Apollo," says Geraldine; "but he has more solid worth than mere beauty. He is kind. He is rich. I declare," with a supreme belief in the powers of her own charms as compared with mine, "I would marry him myself."

"I wish to goodness you would then!" say I, petulantly.

Kitty bursts out laughing.

"There is but one thing to prevent that," says she.

"Exactly so," says Geraldine, calmly. "He hasn't asked me! In the meantime, he *has* asked *you*, Molly! And if you refuse him *outright*, believe me, Molly, you will live to repent it."

"What's the good of money, if one isn't happy?" say I, disconsolately.

"The girl who talks like that must be mad," says Geraldine. "Was anybody ever *really* unhappy with ten thousand a year? *Think* of it, Molly! Oh, yes, I know what *some* people think—that luxury deteriorates, weakens one, but, believe me, there is a great deal of moral enjoyment to be got out of a fine house and a good-looking frock, and——"

"*Frock!*" interrupts Kitty. "*Frocks*, you mean. Unlimited frocks. I shouldn't wonder, Molly," meditatively, "if you got them all from Worth."

"And besides there are other things," says Gerry. "You ask us on visits—fancy! How nice it would be! You could take us about, and show us things."

"And marry us respectably." This last is from Kitty, and there is certainly a false ring in it.

"I don't believe *you* want to be married respectably," say I. "I believe you want to marry Paddy Burke."

"I *said* you were a child," says Kitty, promptly, though I can see she has the grace to blush. "Never mind *me*, however. Think of the high estate that is offered you. Why, you—you could give lots of

money to the poor. You could endow an hospital. You could"—a brilliant suggestion this—"make Mickey and Mary Kate. happy for ever,"

"More than that," says Geraldine, calmly, "she could get back *Blueskin* !"

It is the crowning argument ; I go down before it. *Blueskin* ; to get back *Blueskin*, and give him to darling Dad once more ! Even at the very *last* I struggle against the insidious suggestion.

"Sir Willoughby will sell him soon," say I.

"Nonsense," says Kitty. "Is it a lovely horse like *that* ?"

"It is your business, at ail events, to see that he doesn't," says Geraldine, severely. "You know how Dad's heart is wrapped up in *Blueskin*."

"How can *I* prevent him from selling him ?" cry I, miserably.

"That is best known to yourself," says Geraldine. "It *all* depends on you. You are likely to see Sir Willoughby again ?" The tone is a question.

"He said he was coming here to-morrow," confess I, miserably.

“*To-morrow ?*”

“Yes. He said Paddy Burke was coming too, and —Mr. Dickenson.”

It is now Gerry's turn to change colour. She flushes delicately, but hardly loses herself:

“*Are* they all coming?” says she. “Mr. Dickenson said something *about* it, but I did not believe him. However, if Sir Willoughby is coming, Molly, I *beg* you to accept him. Delays are dangerous! Don't lose a moment! Say yes, *at once*.”

“One would think you imagine he would throw me over,” say I, angrily.

“I say nothing!” slowly, “except that one cannot marry a baronet every day, and that there are ten thousand good reasons why you should say yes to him.”

At this moment Kitty bursts out laughing.

“How funny she looks,” says she, nodding at me. “How will you feel when you are my Lady? The servants will call you *that*. What a ridiculous little Lady. Why, you look about thirteen!”

“She will look the part perfectly,” says Geraldine,

with decision : she moves a little so as to be able to make a warning grimace at Kitty, supposed to be behind my back, but perfectly plain to me all the same.

"There is no necessity for you to destroy the shape of your nose," say I, angrily. "*That* won't make me accept him."

"I don't suppose anything will, if you have made up your mind to refuse him," said Gerry, angrily too.

"Nonsense. Of *course* she hasn't done that," puts in Kitty, airily. "She only wants time to think it over."

"Yes—time—time," says I, grasping at the opening eagerly.

"Just so!" says Kitty. "Though—there isn't very *much* time, is there? He is coming down to-day with Paddy."

"Oh! but I needn't make up my mind *to-day*."

"I really think you had better," says Kitty, nodding her head.

"I can't," groan I. "I can't indeed! Oh! *why*, *why* has no one found out what our grandfather did with his fortune!"

"You are a little mad on that idea," says Gerry. "The poor old gentleman did nothing with it, because it wasn't there to do anything with."

"I've often thought," say I, timidly, "that he might have buried it somewhere—one *has* heard of such things."

"Yes, in books," says Kitty. "*We* don't live in a book of that sort, worse luck."

"For all that!" say I, "he might have hidden his money—if only for spite. You know they say he hated Dad."

"Which only proves the folly of the whole argument," says Gerry. "Who *could* hate Dad!"

"Still," persist I, "if that money *could* be found what a blessed thing it would be. We should be all rich—all heiresses. *Then*—I need not marry him!"

"Ah!" sighs Kitty *sotto voce*, "*then*, I *could* marry him!" She seems sunk in reverie!

"True, true!" breathes Gerry to herself. "Then I *should* marry him!"

I stare at them! Do they both want to marry Sir Willoughby—or—Kitty solves the mystery in part.

"Poor Paddy!" says she.

"Oh! It's Paddy *you* mean," say I. "But Gerry, what did you mean, Gerry?"

"I didn't mean Sir Willoughby at all events," says she. "And he is the one important subject now. I must say you are a lucky girl, Molly. I would give a good deal to be able to make Dad as happy as *you* can on his return."

"You take it so for granted," say I, fretfully. "I only said, I'd *think* about it. And!—oh! Gerry, I wish he wasn't so *ugly*!"

Here Kitty gives way to untimely mirth. Geraldine withers her with a glance.

"I fail to see that he is so very ugly," says she severely. "To *me*, at all events, he does not seem half so impossible in appearance as our unfortunate cousin, Paddy Burke."

"Nonsense!" says Kitty, growing very red. "Paddy may not be—*well*—not exactly *handsome*, but——"

This is too much! Geraldine and I lean back in my chair and *roar*, and after a second's severe struggle

with herself, Kitty gives in and roars in concert.

"But seriously though, Gerry," says she presently—and it is impossible not to note the *coaxing* of her tone,—“*don't* you think Paddy has a sweet smile?”

"As you admire it so much, I am glad there is such a generosity about it," says Gerry. "One can't have too much of a good thing, they say, and *his* smile reaches from ear to ear!"

This, I feel, is unkind.

"Never mind, Kitty," say I. "He is lovely in one way if not in another!"

"Well, so is Sir Willoughby," says Kitty, meaning to be grateful—but failing utterly. "*He's* ugly if you like, but—er—nothing repulsive, you know."

I groan.

"Quite so," says Geraldine. "Though I must say it is a pity, Kitty, that you have never learned how to express yourself. Sir Willoughby has nothing against him—his limbs are straight—he walks well, is perhaps a trifle tall, and (is she thinking of Dickenson I wonder)—but he has a fine figure, a most genial countenance, and——"

"Large and brilliant eyes," interrupt I, scornfully, "a perfect mouth, and a nose like a Greek god ! Pshaw ! "

"At all events you must admit one thing," says Geraldine, with dignity. "He looks like a gentleman."

"Well—yes," reluctantly, "he does."

"A rare thing nowadays !" says my wise sister. "Gerry, you talk like a book," says Kitty, with a prodigious yawn, "the sort of book that puts one to sleep. I'm worn out. Come to bed—all of us. To-morrow and its troubles lie ahead ; let us get strength to support them."

"Before we go, Molly," says Gerry, who really must be a daughter of the horseleech, "remember, you have pledged yourself to accept Sir Willoughby to-morrow."

"Oh ! perhaps he won't ask me again," say I, hopefully.

"That is beside the question. If he *does*, you promise to accept him ? "

"Yes, I suppose so," murmur I faintly.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Hate is needful in a desperate case."

"I cannot love him ;

Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,
Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth."

It is close on noon when I awake. The sun is shining gaily through the curtains of my room, a big bluebottle fly is buzzing round my head, and—who are these demons staring at me? I lift myself with a view to self-defence, and find I am looking at Geraldine and Kitty. Geraldine indeed is shaking me very vigorously.

"Get up—get up ; you have scarce five minutes. They are coming at one, you know."

"They—who?"

"Nonsense, Molly ! You must be the *eighth* sleeper if you can't answer that. Here, *hurry !* *They*, if

you must be told, are Sir Willoughby and Paddy and Mr. Dickenson."

"*All* of them," say I, miserably, "and we can't even ask them to lunch."

"Oh! *That's* all settled. They know about that," says Kitty, airily (really Kitty is a most remarkable person). "Now *do* rouse yourself, Molly. Here is your tea, and some toast, and an egg; all you can expect when there is a civil war raging round you."

"Oh! I remember now!" say I, springing up in bed. "*What* of Aunt Jane?"

"Never mind her," says Gerry, contemptuously. "Keep to the point."

"Well, that's Aunt Jane!"

"No it isn't, it's *you*—on this occasion only. What dress will you wear, Molly? Your pink, I think."

"Yes," says Kitty, with what I consider a most senseless snigger. "She looks a little less ugly than usual in that."

"I sha'n't wear the pink, certainly," declare I, with

decision. Then wrathfully, "For goodness' sake what do you mean by being so attentive to me to-day?"

"Well, the blue if you like, but I should recommend the pink," says Gerry, in a tone distinctly diplomatic. "It is of course for yourself to decide." Really it would be well for Mr. Dickenson to throw up his commission, marry Gerry, and go in for an attachéship. She'd make his fortune in no time.

"Yes, the pink," says Kitty. "I've put some hot water into your bath, Molly, and if you don't hurry it will be cold. Cold water is all very well as a rule, but *hot* water is so refreshing when one is tired. Come now, make haste, and finish your breakfast. You must dress, you know."

"For the sacrifice," groan I, miserably. At which, I regret to say, they both laugh unfeelingly.

"Were you *at* breakfast downstairs?" ask I presently. "Did you"—eagerly, fearfully—"see Aunt Jane!"

"No; we funk'd that. We'd have gone to our graves—starved corpses—rather than encounter her.

But Bridget, who is of the salt of the earth, brought us up something an hour ago."

"Then you haven't seen her?"

"Fee-fo-fum, you mean, in a feminine edition?"

Yes. Just now, in the hall."

"Well, how does she look?"

"Oh, very poorly, *very* poorly—thanks."

"No! but *really*."

"Like my Lord High Executioner," says Gerry, with disgust. "I assure you as her eyes met mine, my blood *froze* in my veins."

"Mine boiled," says Kitty. "Climates are nothing where Gerry and I are concerned. But she *is* an old cat, anyway!"

"What if she sees *them* coming?" say I, nervously.

"She *can't*. I've told Paddy all about it," says Kitty, with conviction. "They are to come in at the small lower garden gate. The little iron one—you know. Once in the orchard Aunt Jane can't know anything about them. You know she never stirs from the house unless compelled."

"Pity the apples aren't ripe," say I.

"Yes, isn't it. They might get something to eat then ; as it is, they must lunch on gooseberries."

"I say, Molly, *do* hurry ! I never saw any one take so long to eat one small egg."

"I believe she is doing it on purpose," says Gerry, who is, too, all impatience.

"I'm not !" say I, indignantly, "only—only—" I put aside my tray with an angry movement—"only *why* can't we discover that lost treasure ?"

"Treasure !"

"Our grandfather's treasure," say I, slipping slowly out of the bed on to my bare feet.

"For the simplest of all reasons, my good child. There is no lost treasure to be found. Our grandfather, in my opinion, was a swindle."

"Oh, I can't ! I *won't* believe that," say I, still clinging to my old belief, with a strong fervour.

"Well, never mind," says Gerry. "A belief in the impossible always shows a tranquil mind. Here—don't stand there in your bare feet—so bad for you !"

Indeed both she and Kitty now begin to load me

with attentions. They *all but* offer to bathe me. Indeed, it is with the utmost difficulty I get them out of the room whilst I am washing myself.

In spite of me they know when I have got into my—well, my first garment again, and begin tapping at the door to be let in—and *when* in (I must have been mad to unlock that door) they take me into possession.

They do my hair; they fasten my strings; they hook all my eyes, and they tie my ribbons; they even settle my brooch, and put my one bangle on my arm. They turn me round, as though I were an automaton, and tell each other in loud whispers, “that I’ll do now,” and that “I’m quite respectable”; finally they take me out of my room, along the corridor outside, and to the top of the stairs.

Here we all pause, and look over. Deadly silence reigns! Now—now, or never, is our chance! We advance cautiously a step or two, we pause again. Once more all is peace, not a suspicion of Aunt Jane anywhere, not a sound, not a sigh, *certainly* not a snort. With a look of silent congratulation each to

each, we begin to descend the staircase, and are just in the middle of it, when a screaming noise behind us, a whimper, a scramble, a pattering of small paws, and finally a wild triumphant bark, that betrays her knowledge of our whereabouts, and Sally, my little terrier, is upon us—*literally* upon us. She is jumping up and down, pawing lovingly each of us in turn. She had lost us since late last evening, having been given then to Bridget, with strict orders that she was to be kept till called for, but now somehow she had broken loose, and with joy unbounded claims us for her own. Wild and furious are her demonstrations of delight, wilder still the sharp shrill barks that come from her tiny throat. Vainly I catch her up and hug her to my heart—in the intervals that occur between the licking of my lips and the struggles to descend and jump again, Sally gives way to piercing sounds calculated to wake the dead.

We look at each other. All indeed seems over. The dull creaking of a door in the back hall—the door that leads to the library—rouses us once more to the animation that sometimes rises from despair. With one

consent we catch up the tails of our gowns and make a rush for it. We clear the hall in five bounds—in two bounds more we find ourselves in the open air, racing for our lives towards the orchard, Sally in full chase behind us.

We have scarcely arrived there, and are still indeed standing panting and laughing nervously, and looking occasionally behind us as if expecting the arrival of our arch-foe, when a low knock upon the little side-gate that leads to the meadow below strikes on our ears.

“There they are!” says Kitty.

CHAPTER XV.

"I knew 'twere madness to declare this truth,
And yet 'twere baseness to deny my love.
But such a love, kept at such awful distance :
Why shines the sun, but that he may be viewed ?"

"Oh, not so *soon*," cry I, turning pale. But Kitty has run forward, and has now unfastened the gate, and is greeting with perfect *aplomb* the three arrivals.

"Halt ! who goes there ?" cries she gaily.

"A friend," says somebody. Unmistakably Paddy Burke, whose accent is rich, if not rare.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign."

"'Aunt Jane !'" says Paddy, in a low but distinct tone, at which we all laugh—I rather faintly, my heart is heavy.

"She's been at it again, I can see that," says Paddy, who has now come forward, followed by Mr. Dicken-

son and Sir Willoughby. "You all look as if you had the toothache! *Dear* old woman, our Aunt Jane! Any chance of her gathering fruit in the orchard to-day? I know how Arcadian are her little ways."

"She never comes here," says Kitty, "that's why *we* are here. But last night—this morning rather—*she*—she——"

"She *did*!" says Paddy, feelingly. "I *quite* understand. I've heard a good deal of her from Fanny. Fanny says when she was in the house with her, she did nothing but worry her all the time—such delightful worrying. Followed her from pillar to post, talking at her without intermission. I tell Fanny she ought to cultivate it, but then she worries *me*, so there is nothing to be gained."

"No, nothing," says Geraldine, turning to Mr. Dickenson, who is flinging sympathy at her broadcast through his eyeglass. "She is dreadful. She will remain so. That is all."

"She ought to be locked up," says Mr. Dickenson, indignantly, shifting his glass from one eye to the other, and then back again.

"Tut!" says Paddy Burke, "she ought to be given a nice quiet *grave*! That's what *she* wants."

"No. It's what *we* want for her," says Kitty, vindictively.

"Oh! you should have heard her this morning," says Geraldine. "She *did* give the bastinado with her tongue, and *such* a tongue. We *were* frightened. Poor little Molly here nearly fainted."

"Oh! no, Gerry, I didn't faint," say I quickly.

"Well, as I say—*nearly*," says Gerry.

"She scolded *you*?" says Sir Willoughby, who had come up to me at once, and who, though I can feel that he is close to me, I have not once looked at, after the first compulsory handshake.

"She scolded us all," return I, my eyes still downcast. Oh! if he would only go away. If the earth would *only* kindly open and swallow me up. If I had not made that promise to the girls—if he would forget he had fallen in love with me.

"She must be a perfect *devil*!" says Sir Willoughby, vehemently.

My heart sinks. No. He has *not* forgotten!

"Impossible," Kitty cries merrily, "the devil is of *your* sex."

"Then she is his wife!" says Paddy. "But no—no—I give him better choice than *that*."

"You couldn't; she would exactly suit him. She does nothing but slang us from morn to dewy eve," says Kitty. Those flowers of speech, as I have hinted, are now culled from the conversation of our cousin Paddy.

"I am so sorry," says Geraldine to Mr. Dickenson, "that we could not have asked you to luncheon, but, as it is, and Dad away, and Aunt Jane as *she* is—we—we thought it wiser——"

"Luncheon! Who cares about luncheon?" says Paddy Burke.

"Not I, for one," says Mr. Dickenson, bravely.

"There are gooseberries and currants," says Kitty, in a depressed tone—it is the first sign of grace I have seen in her.

"Gooseberries!" says Paddy, darting forward as if wild for the chase. "Who said gooseberries?"

Kitty" seizing her, "*you* did. Come, come and redeem your promise!"

They disappear, like a flame hidden round the corner. A hope that they will not make themselves ill comes to me, as I wait, sick at heart, for what is to or *may* follow. Geraldine! won't even Geraldine stay?

She is talking to Mr. Dickenson.

"This is an insecure spot," says she. "Aunt Jane may appear here at any moment. We had better move on. Molly, you and Sir Willoughby cannot do better than follow us."

"Yes, we are coming," say I, in a low, most miserable tone.

We walk on, following the others, but rounding a turn, find that the others have deserted us, and are out of sight beyond redemption.

"Where are they?" ask I, turning to my companion, with a sort of nervous gaiety.

"Ah! never mind them now," says he, quickly. "Stay here for a moment, Molly." He pauses, and, as if fascinated, I stand still and stare at him. Yes,

the end has come. They have gone—they have deserted me, and here I am, as a lamb for the slaughter, silent, miserable, but *not* resigned.

“They have been talking to you,” says Sir Willoughby, slowly.

“Yes,” the truth slips from me, in spite of myself.

“And——”

I make no answer to this. I stand before him, silent, miserable, with downcast head and heightened colour, nervously moving with one foot the pebble beneath it.

“And—what is your decision?”

“Oh!” cry I, suddenly, looking up at him for the first time. “You know how it is with us; we are poor—*so poor*—and Gerry and Kitty think that as I don’t love any one else, I ought to accept you.”

“‘As you don’t love any one else!’” He comes closer to me and takes my hands in his. “You *don’t* then, love any one else.”

“Oh! Of course I don’t,” say I, trying to get my hand out of his. As I do it I feel I am disgracefully

young. "What is the good of *love* ? I don't believe there *is* any such thing—do you ?"

"Yes, I do," says my unwelcome suitor, warmly. "I believe in it firmly when I look at *you*. Molly, you will marry me ?"

I pause. My heart seems to die within me. The last moment has come. To marry !

"No, no !" I cry, sharply.

"No ! Molly——"

"It will be 'no,' when you understand. Sir Willoughby, listen to me," say I, looking up at him with a white face and clasped hands. "I love no one. You have heard me say that. You know, then—that I—don't love *you*."

"Yes, I know that !"

"Well, that is all, isn't it ?" say I, feverishly.

"No," says he.

"There is more, then ; but what more ?"

I stand back from him, my eyes bright with tears, my lips parted.

"There is this," says he, "that if you love no one at all there is the chance left open to me that in time

you may love me. If you *did* love another fellow, I beg you, I entreat you, to believe," says he, "that I should be the very first to retire from the field and leave you free to give your heart fair play ; but as it is——"

"As it is," say I, slowly, and with wide open, despairing eyes, "you understand, don't you? I shall marry you—if you still wish it. I shall be"—I pause and draw back from him as if frightened—"your wife ; but—but—I shall not *love* you. I shall not *indeed*," vehemently.

von "Who, will you love, then," says he, "yourself? <
Oh ! I am not afraid of that. So long as you love no other man I have courage. No true woman ever loves herself to the exclusion of all others. Molly, in time you will love me."

"I don't think so," say I, standing before him in the path with my hands clasped, and my eyes looking bravely into his. "I don't love you now, not a *bit*. I like you, but to *love* you, that would be difficult." Here I pause, suddenly struck by the enormity of my last sentence. I cover my eyes with my hands.

"Oh, don't mind me, I am rude—hateful ; go away and forget me."

"I could go away, certainly, that would be easy," says he ; "but I could not forget you, that would *not* be easy. I could *never* forget you."

"Well, you know," sob I, "you know now everything. That I don't love you, that I shall never love you, that——"

"Yes. I know everything," he interrupts me in a clear, strange tone. "I *quite* understand. You don't love me, you will never love me. You are marrying me solely for my money. If I were a poor man, you would not so much as deign to look at me. If you had money yourself, I should be the last man on earth you would choose. You would treat me then as the dust beneath your feet. Oh ! yes, I know. I know, too, that you rather dislike me than otherwise, that you——"

"Oh, no, 'no," interrupt I, vehemently. "It is not true, all that. I *never* said that I *disliked* you. You need not——" pausing, and adding with my

usual happiness, "you need not make things *worse than they are!*"

I stop dead short, almost as the luckless words pass my lips I realise the meaning of them—the cruel meaning.

"Truly, I must be a poor fellow," says he, gazing at me with sad eyes, "to accept you after that. Yet—yet—" he lays his hands suddenly on my arms, and draws me towards him, "and yet I *cannot* give you up. I will risk it. Yes, even now! Such love as mine *must* find its reward in time. And"—looking at me keenly—"it is true what you say, you love *no* one!"

"I don't—I don't, indeed," earnestly. "And I sha'n't, ever—ever—*at all!*"

Sir Willoughby smiles, very ruefully.

"That is a dismal saying," says he. "And yet I like it, it gives me scope. It gives me a chance! It lets me believe that in the end I shall triumph. One thing only I ask, Molly"—he pauses, and regards me earnestly—"that you will not steel your heart against me."

“Why should I do that?” say I, reproachfully. “What folly that would be. Do you think I am not *sorry* that you are so unhappy? Don’t you know,” gazing at him with clear eyes, “that I would give anything in the world to be *able* to love you!”

“*Don’t!*” says he sharply, as if cut to the heart. He puts me from him, and walks away a yard or two, leaving me standing alone, abashed, miserable, in the centre of the pathway. I am *so* miserable indeed, that presently I cover my face with my hands and burst into tears. When I cry there is no mistake about it. I do it heartily, and with all my might; my sobs now rend the air. It would be impossible for any one a hundred yards away not to hear me, and to Sir Willoughby, who is only three yards away, they must sound like thunder. They bring him to my side instantly.

“Is this how we are beginning?” says he, mournfully, taking me into his arms, which I acknowledge to myself are far too kind for such an unfeeling, thoughtless wretch as I am. “I have made you cry—I, who had told myself I should study nothing

but your happiness. Look here, Molly, if you are so wretched over all this, give it up! I can go away—they won't worry you once I'm out of your sight, and"—bitterly—"it won't take you long to forget me."

"Oh, it would; it would, indeed," sob I, clinging comfortably to him. "There has been so much fuss made about it all that I *couldn't* forget you, if I tried." He makes a movement here that warns me I am again putting my foot in it. "And, besides," I go on hurriedly, "I've promised the girls to accept you, and——"

Here he mutters something about the girls that begins, I'm afraid, with a big, big D. A last effort to be pleasing occurs to me.

"And, besides," I exclaim fervently, "I don't *want* to forget you!" When I have uttered this astounding lie I stand quite still expecting to be racked by my conscience because of the uttering of it. To my amazement I don't feel racked at all. *Is* it a lie? Perhaps not, after all. He has been good to me—kind—*always* kind, and there is always some charm

about the person who thinks you the nicest girl in all the world.

"Oh ! if I could believe that," says he, passionately. He strains me to his heart. "Even that—even *so* much. My darling—my sweet little girl, I cannot give you up."

"Well, you needn't," say I, mopping my eyes and blowing my nose. "I think I'd rather you didn't now—now that you know everything—now that you understand that I don't——"

"There—that will do," says he hurriedly, "And, Molly, what sort of an engagement ring would you like?"

A ring ! I have never had a ring in my life. Neither has Kitty. Geraldine has an old-fashioned one that used to belong to mother, but it isn't pretty : the gold is so pale and the pearls so dark and dingy.

"I thought," says Sir Willoughby, blushing a dark red to his very brows, "that if you didn't mind I should like it to be made of rubies. I know people like diamonds better ; but diamonds," looking distinctly ashamed of himself, "are rather—er—unlucky,

aren't they, like opals? and—of course, it's rather small to be superstitious, but——” He breaks off as if not knowing quite what to say next. “Of course you shall have a diamond ring too,” says he, eagerly. “But if you would have rubies as our engagement ring, I should be—er—awfully obliged to you.”

Rubies! Diamonds! *Two* rings? Oh! if the girls could only hear.

“Not *two* rings,” I stammer nervously. “One—one will be *quite* enough. You really must *not* give me more than one.”

“I shall give you all I have,” says he. “My heart, my life, my fortune. *What* could be too good for you?”

“*You* are,” cry I, tearfully. Oh! *why* can't I love him? I feel that my eyes are filling, “Sir Wilmoughby——” I begin, nervously.

“I wish you would call me Will,” interrupts he.

“Oh, I couldn't!” say I, drawing back.

“You could, if you tried. *Do* try!”

I shake my head.

“Too soon!” I murmur.

"Is it? Yet you have known me as long as I have known you, and I can call *you* Molly."

"Ah! that is because you love me," say I, naively, "whilst I do not——"

"Yes—yes, of course," interrupting me with haste. "Well, never mind; you"—with a sigh—"can take your own time to it."

"No, I shan't. I'll call you by your name this very instant," say I, rather ashamed of my churlishness, after all the beauty of his behaviour towards me. I pause—I look round for inspiration. I search for a speech for which to bring in the desired name. At last I burst out with—

"Do you like gooseberries—WILL!"

It seems to me that I have shouted it at the top of my lungs; indeed, it had been an effort with me to say it at all. Now that I have said it in this loud, unsentimental fashion, I feel ready to sink with shame. I know I should have breathed it soft and low, like the heroines in the novels, but, as it is, I suppose I have once again annoyed and disgusted him.

Partly to my relief, and much more to my chagrin,

he bursts out laughing. He *roars* indeed, in the most irrepressible fashion.

"Well, I don't care," cry I, blushing and frowning. "It is a *ridiculous* name. 'Will, will you come here?' or 'I will, Will,' or 'Will, will you?'"

"Yes ; I will then," says he, and suddenly taking me in his arms he bends his head to mine. His face is almost touching mine indeed, when he stops, and looks at me.

"May I?" says he, gently.

"May you what?"

"May I—kiss you?"

"Oh ! no," I am beginning indignantly, when suddenly the sound of a voice—Kitty's voice—calling to me in a frenzied fashion puts an end to all things.

"Molly ! Molly ! Molly !" calls she.

CHAPTER XVI.

“As love without esteem is volatile and capricious, esteem without love is languid and cold.”

HER voice is piercing, and pregnant with fear. *It* comes first, and after it—*now*—a rushing as of many feet.

“Molly !” comes the voice again, and now here they all are, scampering round the corner, Sally, my little terrier, at their heels.

Ah ! that dog ! At once I grasp the situation, even before Kitty has time to fling herself bodily upon me (no joke this !) and explain matters in burning accents.

“She’s coming ! She’s on our track ! . We caught sight of her near the laurels. The dog betrayed us ! Run, Molly. She’ll be here in a second !”

"Aunt Jane?" gasp I.

"Who else?" asks Geraldine, impatiently; she has come up last of all, with Mr. Dickenson, who looks the picture of fright. Paddy Burke surveys him with a curious joy.

"You're not well, Dicky," says he; "you are not your wonted self. You look weak! Remember, if you give way in our race for life, Aunt Jane will catch you and claw you!"

"She is just as likely to catch and claw *you*," says Mr. Dickenson, angrily. "*I'm* not afraid."

"Aren't you? You look rather yellow," says Paddy, pleasantly. He stares quickly behind him, as if at some awful thing approaching. "Whoop!" says he with a yell that might raise the dead. It certainly raises Mr. Dickenson.

"Heavens and earth!" shrieks that hero, springing up a yard from the earth. When he comes down again it is to see Paddy hanging on to himself and shaking with joy.

"By Jove, Burke," says he, wrathfully, "you may call that a capital trick if you like, and—and with

ladies present too, but for *my* part I call it a deuced ungentlemanly thing to do, and——”

“Keep your hair on,” says Paddy, utterly unabashed. “Don’t fash yourself over a trifle.”

“How did she find us out?” ask I hurriedly, staring at the turn in the far distance that may at any moment show us Aunt Jane, in person, terrible, and full of awful purpose.

“Oh, that dog of yours ! You remember how she barked as we went downstairs ? You remember the opening of the library door ? Ah ! it wasn’t for *nothing* she barked. Aunt Jane heard her, and has been pursuing us ever since.”

“Ever since ? ”

“Yes. She has been ‘on the prowl’ ever since,” says Kitty, borrowing once again from Paddy Burke’s dictionary. “And it wouldn’t have mattered much—she would never have found us *here* but for your Sally. You know how Sally hates her ; so when Aunt Jane drew nigh Sally sniffed her—ay, even in the outer garden—and then she uplifted her voice, and scolded

Aunt Jane with might and main, and—told her where we were.”

“Bad little Sally,” say I, in whose arms Sally now is.

“Put down that dog,” says Geraldine sharply, “and run. She’ll be here in a moment.”

“Yes, yes, indeed, Molly,” says Kitty. “There is no time to be lost. We dodged her round the rhododendrons. But she is sure to catch us up presently. Oh, hurry, hurry, *do!*”

Here Paddy Burke breaks in. He catches hold of Kitty’s hand and makes for the upland path. As he runs he quotes :—

“Oh, hasten ! oh, let us not linger !

Oh, *fly*—let us fly—for we *must!*”

His voice dies away in the distance.

“Come, come, you too, dear Miss O’Connor, I entreat you,” says Mr. Dickenson, turning to Geraldine a face pale with terror. “*Any* moment your estimable aunt may be upon us, and then—*consider* what might happen then !”

"True." Geraldine pauses, and as she does so a small terrible figure at the end of the walk comes into view. It is our snark ! It is Aunt Jane !

"There isn't *time* to consider," cries Geraldine, and picking up her skirts she flies round the next corner. Mr. Dickenson rushes after her, and Sir Willoughby and I are left alone.

"There isn't a second to be lost," says Sir Willoughby, "if you would keep your head upon your shoulders. The foe is upon us. Gird up your loins, Molly, and put your best leg foremost."

He catches my hand in his, and dashes up the nearest pathway. It occurs to me that he is running very badly until I look at him. Then I can see that he is choking with laughter. Nevertheless, he holds in until we have reached the top of the hill, and have plunged into a bunch of laurels that hide us from the world—and Aunt Jane.

He is still holding my hand. We sink upon a kindly branch, and listen intently. Not a sound breaks the stillness, save the singing of the birds in

the bushes, and the glad sweet rushing of the river down below.

"We are safe, I think," says Sir Willoughby; and then, "When will your father be home, Molly."

"I don't know. We expect him any day, every day. Why?"

"Why?" He looks surprised. "Because I want to speak to him about our engagement."

"Oh *that*!"

"Well, it is something, isn't it?"

"Yes," slowly, indifferently. And then, remembering, "Yes, yes, *of course*!"

"It is all the world to me, at all events," says Sir Willoughby, a little mournfully. "It is nothing to you, Molly, I can see."

"Oh, indeed it is," say I, shamefacedly. "It is a great deal. I *do* think about it, *sometimes*. But—but not so much as you do, I know that."

"Yes. And I know it too. But—I hope—I hope always. Oh! Molly, shall I hope in vain?"

"How can I tell," say I, confusedly, with downcast eyes, and fingers nervously intertwining.

Once again Kitty comes to the rescue.

"Are you there, you two?" whispers she through the branches of the laurels. "If so, I come to tell you the coast is clear. *She* has gone. And Sir Willoughby—*are* you there, Sir Willoughby?"

"Yes."

"Then *go*. If you delay, all will be lost." It occurs to me that Kitty's usually joyous vein is greatly changed, that it is dull—tearful. It is indeed as the voice of one who has been crying!

"I am going," says Sir Willoughby. He stands up, and I stand up too, and Kitty disappears. "Molly," says he hurriedly, "you know what I asked you when—when they came up to us that *first* time. Will you? Can you?"

"Call you by your name? I think I can now," say I, with firmness.

"Not that. You *must* remember," says he, vehemently. "I asked you to kiss me. I"—flushing—"I *could* have kissed you then, whether you liked it or not; but—I waited." He looks at me. "Kiss me once, Molly," says he.

I feel there is no getting out of it this time. Something in his face warns me it will be unwise to refuse ; and after all he *has* been very good to me always. Still, to *kiss* him !

I prepare to obey. Clasping my hands tightly behind my back I advance towards him, and with downcast eyes hold up my right cheek to him—that part of my cheek that is closest to the ear. My whole air and pose is full of a gentle resignation !

Thus I wait for the dreaded salute, but, to my amazement, it never comes. My virgin cheek remains unmolested.

“ Pshaw ! ” says Sir Willoughby, contemptuously, “ you can keep your kisses ! ”

And with that he turns sharp round and marches down the path and out of the small iron gate without so much as a backward glance, or a word of farewell.

Very rude, *I* call it !

CHAPTER XVII.

"My doom is closed."

"I have not that alacrity of spirit
Nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have."

"WELL?" cry Geraldine and Kitty in a breath.

"You accepted him?"

"Yes. But——" I am still standing where Sir Willoughby left me.

"Oh, *that's* all right," says Gerry.

"No, it isn't. It's all wrong. He has gone away in a perfect *frenzy* because I—didn't care to kiss him!"

"Well, really, I call that *very* unreasonable of him," says Kitty. "Just as if you could fall in love to order! He should have been content with your promise to marry him. I should think it would be *horrid* to kiss a person unless you were fond of him,

and—oh, *dear!*” says poor Kitty, breaking down and sighing.

“What’s the matter with you, Kitty,” ask I, anxiously.

“Not much,” says she, wiping her eyes. “Only poor darling Paddy asked me to marry him, and—and of course we haven’t a penny between us, and indeed he says himself that he doesn’t see how we can *ever* be married.”

“Then what was the good of his proposing?” says Geraldine, who is always so shockingly matter-of-fact.

“I don’t know,” disconsolately. “But I think it was so *nice* of him to do it, all the same. Don’t you, Molly?”

“I do indeed,” say I, warmly.

“I *too* have had a proposal!” says Geraldine solemnly.

“No!” cry Kitty and I in chorus. “*That* little wretch.”

“I don’t know to whom you are alluding,” says Geraldine stiffly.

"Why, Mr. Dickenson, of course. You refused him?"

"Yes!" A sound escapes her. Impossible to believe it could be a sigh—and yet it was like it. A sigh of relief, no doubt.

"Naturally," say I.

"Oh! of course," says Kitty.

"Why, of course?" demands Geraldine, in a distinctly unpleasant tone. There is a sudden fire in her fine eyes that puzzles Kitty and me. We had been bent on showing her how superior we think her to her small lover, but to our astonishment she receives our demonstration very badly.

"What's the matter with him?" continues she, with a magisterial air.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all," we stammer eagerly.

"But—at that rate, Gerry—if you can see no fault in him—why did you refuse him?"

"Because he is penniless," says Geraldine in a hollow tone. "You see, Molly," turning to me, "you are not the *only* one who has to make sacrifices!"

"Oh, that is true—that is true indeed!" says Kitty,

beginning to dab her eyes afresh. In fact they are both so lugubrious that my grievance seems to sink into insignificance before theirs. But fancy *any* one wanting to marry Mr. Dickenson. And the stately Geraldine of all people. Why, she could put him in her pocket.

At this moment our one little maid, Judy O'Brien, comes rushing up the path.

"What is it now, Julia?" asks Geraldine, who thinks Julia sounds more aristocratic than Judy.

"Fegs, she's gone, Miss," begins Judy, breathlessly.

"Who—*Aunt Jane*?"

"Divil a less, Miss. Bag an' baggage she's gone, an' a bigger baggage than herself couldn't go. I knew, Miss Gerry, be the way she was goin' on all the mornin' that she was up to somethin'!"

"What was she doing?"

"Well—writin' letthers in the libry like a stame-ingin for wan—an' telegrammin like fury for another."

"A telegram to who?" ask I, quickly.

"Faix to the Masther for wan, Miss."

"To Dad!" I look blankly at Kitty. "She has *told* him," I say, forlornly.

"Oh, I think so indeed, Miss, for Pether, who tuk the message, heard the boy in the office readin' it out. An' there was terrible words in it," he says.

"We don't want to hear them," says Gerry, with a courage that raises admiration in the breast of Kitty and me. We *do* want to hear them. "You can go, Julia."

"But I want to give ye this, Miss!" says Julia, searching in an interminable pocket, and at last producing a telegram.

Gerry pounces upon it, and we rush to her and hang over her shoulders. Gerry opens it. It is from Dad.

"He will be home *to-morrow afternoon*," says Gerry, in a rather ghastly fashion. She glances at the hour on the brick paper. The telegram must have arrived almost as we ran towards the garden early in the afternoon, and it is now close on *six*.

"Why did you not deliver this sooner?" demands Gerry severely.

"Ah now, Miss, and sure ye know I wouldn't disturb ye, when ye were with the young gentlemen."

"When we were with our *visitors*," corrects Geraldine with dignity.

It is now "to-morrow afternoon!" and with hearts filled with joy and remorse, we await the return of Dad. Will he be angry? Was he *ever* angry? Will he scold us? Did he *ever* scold us?

Indeed as the old mare comes trotting carefully round the corner of the rhododendrons, the remorse is forgotten, and it is with hearts filled with joy alone we greet him.

Yet now that we have dragged him into the library, a sense of guilt once more takes possession of us, as we remember the dreadful telegram that Aunt Jane sent him.

"Oh, Dad—Dad darling,"—cry I, hugging him afresh. "I am afraid you are very angry with us. But don't be angry until *to-morrow*. It is so lovely to see you home again."

He pats my head, as he has patted it off and on

ever since I was a baby of three, but he says nothing. I look up at him. And now that the first warmth of greeting is over, I can see that he is older, thinner, sadder, than he used to be.

"Any luck, Dad?" asks Geraldine gently.

"None! I couldn't manage to sell that part of the land as I hoped. Your uncle could not help me; at all events he would not. One can't blame him: land in Ireland is not a thing one cares to invest in nowadays."

"Still—he might have helped you," says Kitty.

"But what *could* one expect from Aunt Jane's brother!"

There is a long pause. Kitty, as usual, has been a little tactless. At last—

"I wish, girls, you could have found it possible to bear with your aunt—for even these few weeks."

It is his one reproach! He leans back in his chair, still holding my hand, looking so fagged, so worn out, so *hopeless*, that my heart dies within me. Oh! why had we gone to that horrid dance!

"I know—I know"—says Kitty, miserably—"we

shouldn't have gone to Clonbree that night, but we were so sure she would never find out, and——”

“She could always find out anything,” says Dad. “She was born with a hundred eyes. Now, mind, I don't blame you girls—you went with Fanny, and I know what it is to feel young and to want to dance. There; it is all over. Not another word now! But—I'm sorry you have lost the chance of getting your aunt's money. It was a *last* chance.”

He sighs again—heavily.

“It was I who persuaded Kitty and Molly to go to Clonbree that night,” says Geraldine. “And—after all, Dad—I'm glad of it!”

“Glad!”

“Yes, *very* glad. There we met Sir Willoughby Heriot (you remember him, don't you? the man who bought Blueskin), and he—fell in love with Molly.”

Dad drops my hand, and, sitting up, looks at me strangely.

“With Molly! With that child! Nonsense!” says he pointing at me what in any one else would have been the finger of scorn.

"Yes, Molly. It is quite true, Dad. It is not nonsense. He was here yesterday, and proposed to her. She is going to marry him."

"Good Heavens!" says Dad. He springs to his feet in quite the old impulsive fashion, and catching my arms examines me curiously, as if he is now seeing me for the first time.

"She is good-looking, girls!" says he, with a glance at Geraldine and Kitty, "but—a baby!"

"Perhaps he likes babies," says Geraldine drily.

"Oh! it is impossible!" says Dad drearily. "Such luck is not for us. You are mistaken, Gerry. Why, he has ten thousand a year." Again the crushed, tired look comes over his face.

"I am not mistaken," says Gerry calmly. "Molly—speak for yourself."

Now I had expected to feel so miserable when the time came for Dad to hear of the approaching sacrifice I am about to make for my family, that I am the more astonished at finding myself at the present awful moment, not only dry-eyed, but without emotion of any sort. If I have any feeling at all, it is to-

wards mirth. They all look so solemn, so important, that a desire to roar with laughter takes possession of me.

Perhaps, indeed, were I to analyse myself I should know that I am a little proud of myself; and presently, in spite of my determination to play the martyr, I spoil everything by giving way to a gay little laugh.

"You see, Dad," cry I saucily, "that I am not such a baby after all."

"It is astonishing," says Dad. He stares at me, and laughs in turn—his nice, dear old laugh, and—"Sir Willoughby!" says he. "A man of good family; but for the matter of that"—sharply—"no better family than your own, my dear. Sir Willoughby! She will be *Lady Heriot*! Oh, girls! if your mother could have lived to see this day! God knows it is the first day for many years that I have wished her back again, *sorely* though I have missed her always!"

He begins to walk up and down the room; the colour has come back to his face. He looks himself again, and, indeed, years younger.

"Thank God for this good news!" says he piously. And then—with a return of the old gaiety and the merry twinkle in his eyes—"A *fig* for Aunt Jane!" cries he.

We all burst out laughing together; and under cover of this burst of mirth Geraldine whispers to me—

"*Now!* Have you not got your reward?" And indeed I think I have.

"But look here, Molly, child," says Dad. "Do you like him, eh?"

"Yes, I do indeed, Dad," say I truthfully; because I certainly *like* him well enough.

"If you don't," says Dad, gazing at me, "don't marry him, my dear. It is bad to marry a person you don't honestly love. Not if he had the mines of Golconda to his back. You are sure, now, Molly, that you love him, outside and beyond that ten thousand a year?"

"Yes, I love him." I smile gaily. I have made up my mind not to check his delight in my engagement. But the extraordinary part of it (and I can't

even explain it to myself) is, that I don't feel in the least unhappy as I make this statement, which certainly *must* be a lie ; I mean I don't feel as if I *were* telling a lie, which just shows how simple a thing it is to be as untruthful as ever you like. Where are the pangs of conscience one reads about ? I must be a really bad girl, I think.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Thou sweetest thing,
That e'er did fix its lightly-fibred sprays
To the rude rock, ah ! would'st thou cling to me ?”

HIGH up in the heavens the sun is shining, “shining with all his might.” So hot is the earth beneath, that we go delicately like Agag, as if fearing to take fire suddenly and end our days too soon in the inevitable ashes.

It is a week ago since that memorable day in the orchard, and we three girls, with Dad to fall back upon, are endeavouring to entertain Sir Willoughby, Paddy Burke, and Mr. Dickenson. I say *we* are endeavouring—but as a fact I am tongue-tied. It is the first time I have seen Sir Willoughby since our last unkindly parting, and a difficulty about raising my eyes from kind mother earth is now oppressing me.

I had said, "How d'ye do?" to him, of course, but with deep reserve, and had forthwith proceeded to entertain him from behind my sisters' backs. I am the more embarrassed in that I know he had yesterday an interview with Dad with regard to our engagement.

We have been marching through the farmyard, because of a suggestion of Paddy Burke's who had hoped, by getting Dad on to the stock, to escape for a *tête-à-tête* with Kitty, but this bit of diplomacy on his part, has, I am glad to say, proved abortive. Dad has held on to him all the time, and now we are all standing together in the flower garden, discussing the roses.

"But I say," says Dad presently, "you will come in and have a glass of sherry, won't you?"

Heavens! Sherry! There isn't a drop of sherry in the house! I make a dash at Dad's coat-tails, and pull vigorously, if furtively.

"Eh! What?" says he, in a loud, fresh tone. He looks round at me, whereupon I feel as if I should like to sink into the ground! *Fancy* any one's looking

round when they feel their coat-tails pulled ! He might have *known* I meant something ! But poor darling Dad never thinks. "What is it ?" asks he.

"Nothing, nothing," I stammer, my face crimson, tears starting to my eyes. "Only," in a low, shame-faced tone, "there is no sherry."

"Isn't there ?" says Dad, as unconcerned as possible. "Well, never mind. We are out of sherry it seems, Sir Willoughby ; and faith," with his merry ringing laugh, "a good thing too for *you*, as sherry at two shillings a bottle is hardly calculated to raise the cockles of anybody's heart." (Oh ! *Dad* ! even Kitty goes down before this ! To have *no* sherry is bad enough—but to *have had* it, at two shillings the bottle, is beyond redemption.) . . .
 "A whisky and soda anyway !" says Dad genially.
 "A 'drop of the crather,' eh ?" He laughs again, his own happy infectious laugh.

"Thanks. I should much prefer it," says Sir Willoughby, pleasantly. I have not yet sufficiently recovered from my confusion to lift my eyes from the

path beneath me, when this fresh blow falls upon me. Soda-water! There is no soda-water in the house either! Again despair makes its prey of me. Oh! if Aunt Jane had only given us even a five-pound note, how many little luxuries we might have provided. But she has done nothing but cut us out of her will! Something *must* be said, and at once, else Dad will take them in and call for the soda that is not there, yet I *feel* I have not the courage to speak again. I stand silent, half dying with shame and chagrin. Geraldine comes to the rescue.

"There is no soda-water either, father," says she calmly, in her clear, distinct, dignified tones. "But there is water—most excellent water!"

It would be impossible to describe the air with which Gerry gets out this somewhat difficult announcement. Really Gerry at times is wonderful. I cannot help feeling she is somewhat thrown away in this petty village. That "excellent water" is a *chef-d'œuvre*—it is positively *fine*!

Dad tucks his arm into Sir Willoughby's.

"Come in! come in!" says he, "and let us try

this 'excellent water.' Water, I maintain, is the best drink in the world—with something in it! Ha-ha!"

He throws off this old joke with so buoyant an air, that the others catch the infection, and laugh with him right heartily.

"I always think," says Sir Willoughby, "that whisky and water is a far better drink than whisky and soda!"

I know he is telling a lie when he says this, yet somehow I am grateful to him for it—indeed, I feel that if he was any one else but my accepted suitor I could *love* him for it! I have not even yet got sufficient courage to look up, yet somehow I know that Sir Willoughby is staring at me, and can well imagine how *horrid* he thinks I am looking, with my face as red as a peony.

Do you, now?" says Dad, very pleased. "It's good of you to say it, anyway. In my young days—you weren't born then—water was the usual thing; but I confess I look upon soda-water now as a graceful institution of the present century."

Whether Sir Willoughby likes soda-water or *aqua pura* best I cannot say ; at all events, it seems that neither have a great hold upon him. It is scarcely five minutes from his disappearance into the house, before he comes out of it again, and suggests to me a walk through the place.

"Of course you have heard, Molly, that I saw your father yesterday, and told him of our engagement?"

"Yes. I heard," say I, stooping to caress Sally, who is as usual trotting at my heels. "But I thought—because of that last day—that day in the orchard when you got into such a terrible temper——"

"Yes, it *was* terrible!" says he contritely. "I don't know how I could have treated you like that! *You*—Molly! But you will forgive that, won't you?"

"Oh! I forgive you," say I, magnanimously. "The question is have you forgiven me?"

"What could I not forgive you?" says he in a low tone. Then—even in a lower tone, "Your father has given his consent."

"Why should he not," say I, shrugging my shoulders, "when I have given mine?"

"True!" He pauses. "You thought me cross that last day, Molly?"

"No. Not cross."

"What, then?"

"A perfect tyrant!" cry I shortly.

"Because I asked you to——"

"Yes. Just because of that."

"Well, I shan't ask you again!" says he gloomily.

"You may be sure of that."

"Thank you," return I cheerfully. "That's a promise, mind!"

He seems to stiffen into stone after this, and in a sober silence we proceed to the paddock, where in bygone days the foals used to kick their heels, but where now, alas! only two or three calves disport themselves. Sally, who despises cattle, rushes forward as if eager for the fray.

"Come back, Sally. Come back directly!" cry I, glad of an excuse for hearing my own dearly-loved voice again. But Sally is deaf to my call. Head-

long she rushes towards the little month-old bull calf, standing close to the railings below there.

“Wuff! wuff!” says Sally.

“Ma—a!” says the calf; and at once a regular skirmish between them is set afoot. Sally’s barks resound all over the place; the calf grows restive beneath them. At last a more determined effort than usual on the part of Sally to take forcible possession of the bull’s hind leg incenses that clumsy little animal to the last extent. There is a sudden movement on his part—a swift outward plunge of his hind legs—an absurd attempt at a bellow, and away he goes careering madly round the field, leaving poor little Sally motionless, lifeless, on the grass!

It is all the work of a moment. I had been laughing at Sally’s antics the second before, and now——

Simultaneously Sir Willoughby and I pass the wire fence, he over it, I through it, and reach Sally almost together.

My dear little terrier is lying as quietly now as if a bark had never come from her. The little body is still quivering, but as I raise her tenderly, no whine, no

sound of any sort gives me hope that she is yet living. A cruel, ugly cut on the side of the head shows where the calf's hoof had caught her.

"She is hurt ; she is badly hurt," cry I, looking up at Sir Willoughby, who is kneeling beside me ; "but not *dead*, she *can't* be dead. Why it was only a minute ago ! You saw her—you heard her——"

"I am afraid she is dead, however, poor little thing !" says he, gravely.

I lay poor Sally back on the grass, and, getting slowly to my feet, look down at her. My dear little Sally, who loved me so well—who has been the torment—the plague—and the delight of my life for ten long months. She had been such a little baby of a thing when first I got her. I had brought her up myself. All at once I seem to hear her tearing up the stairs in the morning to my bedroom door, and barking furiously to be let in, that she may ask me if I slept well, and if I have a biscuit beneath my pillow for her. Again I see her chewing comfortably at my best boots, and dragging my hat in a playful frenzy round the room. I can feel, too, the touch of her

soft mouth as she nestles in my arms when worn out with the destruction of my property. And now to see her lying there *dead*—it seems horrible !

I cover my face with my hands and burst into tears.

“Molly, darling ! don't be so miserable !” says Sir Willoughby, who I can hear by his voice is most miserable himself. “It can't be helped, you know, and—I'll get you another.”

“Another !” sob I, indignantly. “As if I should ever have another ! Oh ! how *little* you know !”

“Come away, at all events,” says he, gently. “See, I'll carry Sally ; and—shall I bury her for you ?”

“Oh, no, not so soon !” exclaim I, sobbing afresh. “I think I'll put her in the summer-house until this evening, and then Kitty and I will get a nice box, and——” My tears choke me.

“Very well,” says he. He picks up poor Sally, and, having reached the summer-house in the garden, he makes a nice little bed of dry leaves, and lays her on it. I am still crying, though perhaps not so bitterly now. Surprised presently by my companion's

silence, I look up to find him regarding me with an expression as curious as it is full of despair.

“What a heart you have, Molly !” says he. “Is it I, alone, who cannot touch it ?”

There is so much honest unhappiness in his face and voice that it reaches me through my own trivial grief, and makes me a little ashamed of myself.

“How you loved that little creature,” says he, with a glance at the dead Sally—a reproachful glance ! It touches my heart ; or perhaps it is my grief that has softened it !

“Oh, I will try to love you too !” say I, earnestly ; “I will *indeed* !” And then suddenly, almost without any will of my own, I raise my head, and throw my arms round his neck, and lay my cheek against his.

Why I do this I don't know at the moment, and I don't know now. But perhaps the little dog's death—the loss of so small, but so true a friend—has given me a sense of desolation ; a craving for sympathy, for love. Well, I don't know what it was, but certainly *so* much I know—that my arms are round

his neck, and that he is straining me to his heart.

"Molly! Molly!" says he, in a low unsteady tone. Then he puts me from him, just so far that he can look into my face.

"No; I shall not deceive myself," says he. "I'm a fool in many ways, but I sha'n't be a fool about this—this that means my whole life! You *don't* love me Molly. I know that. You are only a little lonely now, and so you come to me, but"—he pauses and lifts my hand to his lips—"you don't love me!"

CHAPTER XIX.

“Good fortune that comes seldom comes more welcome!”

THEY have gone. We are alone—the girls and I—staring down at poor Sally. I am crying as usual, and am conscious of a feeling that I ought to be ashamed of myself, but am sustained by the knowledge that neither Kitty nor Gerry show any disposition to laugh at me. Kitty is really downcast—she had been fond of Sally, and I will say for Gerry that she is behaving very nicely now, considering she had always alluded to Sally, in my small dog's pretty lifetime, as “that nuisance!”

However, I forgive all that at this moment, as I watch Gerry's real regret, as she gazes on the stiff little form before her.

“I'll get Dad to sell that murderer at once!” says

she. "I couldn't have that calf racing round the paddock any more."

"No one could stand that," says Kitty. And then in a low tone that I gratefully acknowledge befits the occasion, "Where shall we bury her, Molly?"

"I thought in the old fort," say I, quite cheering up under this fire of sympathy. "It is a nice out-of-the-way place, and"—beginning to cry again—"the primroses are so lovely there in the spring!"

"Yes, the old fort," says Geraldine. "Now, Molly! Do take courage, ducky. It couldn't be helped, you see, and it is so much better for your dear little dog to die from a kick, than to have to be chloroformed later on, when she was old and nasty."

"Yes, *exactly* so!" says Kitty. But here, I regret to say, she loses hold of her part, and begins to laugh in a strangled fashion.

"What's the matter with you?" demands Gerry, sternly.

"Oh! nothing, only"—choke, choke—"I was thinking of Aunt Jane! Won't somebody chloroform her? Surely she is old and very nasty!"

"There are seasons for all things," says Geraldine, severely. (I shall always think well of Geraldine after this.) "If you will take up Sally, Molly, I'll arrange her!"

The arrangement lies in the shutting up of my poor little dog in a big soap box, that I have lined with cotton wool and adorned with flowers. Gerry, armed with a hammer and nails, does the last offices.

"Now come," says she, giving the box into my arms, and proceeding towards that part of the lower meadow where the tort (a relic of the olden days, when the Danish pirates harried our southern coasts) stands, surrounded by tall elms, planted quite the other day, as it were, when compared with the age of the fort.

It is a charming spot. The old earthen walls are covered with mossy growths, and lichens, and tiny saplings. Inside, luxuriance reigns. Sheltered from wind and storm, flowers bloom, and ferns grow high, and all the grass is green as the heart of an emerald.

It is a remote spot—fully a quarter of a mile from

the house, and in so silent a corner, that seldom, very seldom, does any one pass by it.

It had seemed to me to be a sweetly quiet spot in which to bury my poor Sally.

Kitty has come provided with a spade. "Where shall I dig?" asks she.

"Here, under this old tree," say I, for three large oak trees are growing within the fort.

"But there will be so many roots," says Kitty.

"Yes, yes, of course," say I, disconsolately.

"Never mind, I'll try it," says Kitty, who is always so anxious to be good to every one. Dear Kitty!

As much to her as to our astonishment, the light spade, our own garden spade, goes easily through the turf and ground. There seem to be no roots to speak of, in this particular spot at all events. Kitty turns up the earth, and with a sigh of relief goes at her task with a sudden confidence.

"If it is all like this," says she, "it will be an easy matter." She digs vigorously for about three minutes, when Gerry, taking the spade from her, prepares to do her portion of the work. The box in which my

poor little dog is lying is a well-sized one, and I am anxious that she should be laid deep in the earth, lest any other dog going by should tear at her grave. Already it is two feet deep, and Gerry with a sigh of exhaustion leans upon the spade.

"What a warm day," says she.

"I don't think much of digging as an occupation," says Kitty, thoughtfully ; "and yet I don't know how we have got down so far in so short a time. One would think somebody had been digging here before us."

"I certainly can't imagine why we are not embarrassed by the large roots," says Gerry.

"We must have fixed upon a spot where the larger roots divide, and go each their own way," say I.

"Perhaps. Certainly there are plenty of little ones," says Gerry, who has had considerable experience of them with her pocket-knife.

"Now, it is my turn again," say I.

"Surely, Molly darling, it is deep enough," says Kitty, with mild expostulation. "Even when Dad's *setter* died, he wasn't buried *half* as deep as this."

"Still—another inch or two," entreat I, and, as the tears once more begin to overleap my lids, they give in without further attempt to dissuade me from my task.

And well for us all that they did so! A few more words from either of them, and I should have given in—we should have remained penniless to the end of time, and Sally would have reclined in the richest grave that ever yet dog was given.

My arms are beginning to grow weary, when I come on something flat and hard that puts an end to further exertions.

"I'm afraid this stone is too big to dislodge," I say, scraping at it with the spade. "See—it seems to go right across the bottom."

"Never mind!" says Kitty. "*Indeed*, Molly, it is deep enough—and a nice flat stone at the end is such a—*a finish to it.*"

"Yes. Very well," say I, reluctantly. I am still scraping at the stone.

Suddenly I lean down, and examine it more closely. "*Is it a stone?*" question I.

"What else? Do you imagine you have discovered a diamond mine?" says Gerry, which is the nearest approach to a jest we have allowed ourselves for hours.

"No. But really, Gerry, look—look for yourself! It's—it's shining. *What* is it? Why—I declare——"

"Good heavens! It's a box," says Gerry, peering down. The day is beginning to die, and we cannot see as clearly as we did.

"A box! Come away!" says Kitty, starting back. "Some one has murdered some one and hidden the body away here. *That's* why there were no big roots. Oh! Molly—come"—looking nervously round through the gathering dusk. "Let us *run!* Do—*do* come away from this!"

"Nonsense!" says Gerry. "Scrape a bit more here, Molly. Yes, it is"—her voice rising with excitement, "it is a box! Look at the handle in the middle."

The hand! What hand? Whose hand?" shrieks Kitty, starting back. "Oh! Molly," almost sobbing, "*Are* you going to stay here, and look at a skeleton?"

"A skeleton! in a box twenty inches square. For goodness' sake don't be a fool, Kitty. It's"—looking round her and growing deadly pale, "much more likely to be——"

She pauses.

"Grandfather's treasure," murmur I faintly.

Gerry nods. We all remain speechless for fully half a minute—which is quite a long time for us.

"Gerry!" say I solemnly, "whether we are right or whether we are wrong, I ask you to remember one thing before we go farther, that I always said Dad's father *had* left his money somewhere!"

"I shall remember!" says Gerry, with a gravity that is balm to my soul.

Once again we begin digging—Gerry and I, that is—Kitty refusing to help us, but lingering with us, filled plainly with a kind of fearful curiosity! And now at last there can be no doubt about it. It is a box—a square iron box, heavily clasped at every corner, and fastened with an old-fashioned padlock.

When Gerry and I (Kitty even now refuses to help us) try to lift it, we find it far beyond our strength ;

and, sitting down upon the ground in an exhausted fashion, we look at each other across Sally's grave. Alas ! I fear that poor Sally has been forgotten during the past twenty minutes ! I am always sorry about that, but after all, one would forget a great deal under such excitement as this. It isn't every day—it isn't every hundred years that one digs up a heavy iron box in one's own grounds.

“ Look here, Kitty, you are doing nothing. You decline to do anything,” says Gerry, sharply, “ therefore you had better run back to the house and tell Dad we want him. You can just *whisper* to Dad what we *think* we have found, but not so much as hint to another soul. Now, do you hear ? And—well, yes, you had better tell Dad to bring Murphy with him. Murphy is old and stupid, but he has strength in his arms yet ; and I don't think, if even Dad and we could lift this box from its hole, we could carry it to the house.”

“ I'll go—I shan't be a second,” says Kitty, who is only too delighted to run away from us—a sense of shame alone has held her to us for so long.

And indeed she is as good as her word. In far less time than we dared to hope she is with us again, bringing Dad and the old farm-servant in her train.

"Why—what is this, girls?" says Dad, coming up to us with the light firm step that has stuck to him through all adversities. He looks down into the hole we have dug.

"If it *should* be! If it *should* be, children," says he in a strange, broken tone. "But don't hope—don't. I tell you hope has destroyed me!"

He looks quite unnerved. Stepping down into the little grave we have made, he beckons to old Murphy, and together they lift the iron box to the sward above. With difficulty this is done. It seems to us, indeed, looking on, as if the box had rooted itself to the ground; or is it the spirit of the old miser refusing to let it go?

It is lying on the sward now with the early beams of the young moon gleaming on it, and we three girls with Dad staring at it. Murphy, at a discreet distance, is listening with all his might.

What does it mean? what *will* it mean? Riches or

the same old poverty?—*What* lies within those iron sides?

“Take it up with me, Murphy,” says Dad, beckoning to Murphy. Murphy advances—so do I.

“Oh! Dad! a moment,” cry I. “Wait—do wait a moment! my poor little Sally—she—I *must* bury her before you go!”

“Of course, my dear, of course,” says Dad, in his kind old way. “How could I have forgotten! Here, Murphy, take this spade! Now, Molly, my child, don’t cry any more. There, now! there, now! Gerry, come here, and take her back to the house, and get her a cup of tea.”

But I wait until the last moment, and in a body we all return to the house—the box carried by Dad and Murphy, and poor Sally left behind!

.

I am a prophet indeed! All now applaud my former judgment. The box, having been forced open, has been proved to belong to my grandfather, and discloses not only enough money to make a decent fortune for each of us, but a great quantity of

valuable jewels, and many other things of worth. Instead of being the poorest people in the county, we may now be regarded as almost the richest, and henceforth we shall be styled heiresses !

It is plain to be seen that in this idea both Geraldine and Kitty revel largely. I, alone, stand mute, uncertain. Have I not pledged my word ? Of what use is money to me—money without liberty ? I said I alone, but there is one other person standing over the magic box who looks thoroughly cast down.

“What is it, Dad ?” ask I, slipping my arm round his neck.

“Not much, my dear. Not much. Only—I didn’t think he would have carried the old spite as far as this !”

“You mean grandfather !” says Kitty. “You think he meant to keep you out of his money for ever. But, Dad, why grieve over him ? Who would grieve over a regular *monster* ?”

“Not another word, Kitty !” says Dad, coldly. He gets up suddenly, and puts Kitty from him. It is the sharpest rebuke we have ever had from him in all

our lives, and Kitty, frightened, draws back from him into the shadow !

Her nervous movement goes to his heart. He calls to her.

“Come back, Kitty. Come back, my dear,” cries he, tremulously. “After all, I love you better than I loved him, and why should I hurt you? But—I could have loved him *too*, Kitty, if only he would have let me !”

.

After awhile he goes on. “Now—girls—now, *really*, Geraldine this must be looked into. I shall have this money settled on you three ! It is unsafe with me. Those tenants (though no man knows better how they have behaved to me) will be always on my heart. I’ve squandered too much on them already, ay ! as you all know, I have despoiled my own children for them ; but I shall not do it again. Geraldine, my love, you will write to Dorgan to-morrow, and I’ll have this money settled upon you three girls for ever ; there shall be no doubt about it this time.”

"But, Dad, for yourself?" begins Kitty.

"Not a penny!" says Dad, spreading out his hands. "There is plenty to be got out of the old home to provide for my few wants!"

"Oh, *nonsense*, Dad, darling!"

"There! not a word!" says he. And then, in a lower key, "To tell you the truth, girls—I couldn't touch that money. No! it would *poison* me!"

Poor Dad! He has been really hurt. Hurt to the heart's core. However, we arrange between ourselves to so settle it that he shall be really comfortable for the remainder of his days. May they be long, and long, and long!

CHAPTER XX.

"We are in love's land to-day ;
 Where shall we go ?
 Love, shall we start, or stay,
 Or sail, or row ?
 There's many a wind and way,
 And never a May but May ;
 We are in love's hand to-day ;
 Where shall we go ? "

It is the next morning. We have slept a little, and now we are all three sitting on Gerry's bed, clothed in our nightgowns. Providentially the weather is warm.

"Isn't it *lovely* ?" cries Kitty. "Now I shall be able to marry Paddy !"

"My *dear* Kitty, have you really decided upon that ?" says Geraldine.

"Why not ?" rather starchily.

"Because—well—he—well, you know, Kitty, that he won't *advance* you in life.'

"One word, Gerry," says Kitty, who is evidently, for the first time in her life, in a supreme passion.

"Are *you* going to marry Mr. Dickenson?"

"If he asks me again," says Geraldine, meekly.

"But—but I don't think that likely."

Here, overcome by the severity of our glances she loses courage, and, lying down again upon the pillow, covers her face with the sheet.

"It is my opinion," says Kitty, wrathfully, "that if he doesn't ask you, *you* will ask him. I never saw a girl so much in love in my life."

"Oh, you *have*," says Gerry, emerging from beneath the sheet; "you have seen yourself."

"No, I haven't."

"No? Well go and look in the glass," says Gerry, ruthlessly.

Dreading further pleasantries, and really not believing one word about Geraldine being anxious to marry that little man, I rise to my feet.

"Yes, let us dress ourselves," say I. "You know

Sir Willoughby and the others said they would be over here to-day."

"They said they would be over here this evening," says Kitty.

"Talking of Sir Willoughby," says Kitty suddenly, "what about you, Molly? Are you going to reward him, or throw him over?"

"Yes, that's true, Molly, you needn't marry him now!" says Gerry. "His money is of no account at present. What are you going to do with him?"

"Oh! I don't know," say I, impatiently. I make for the door, and leave them both behind me. In truth I *don't* know what I am going to do with Sir Willoughby; I don't know even now, when the day is at an end, and the young and early moon is riding high in the pale heavens!

He had said he would be here somewhat late. There would be rifle practice and a dozen other things to keep him, and now, as it grows late indeed, with a sudden eager desire to avoid him altogether, I have come out here into the quiet garden, and am roaming from the summer-house to the old fountain

and back again in a sort of nervous fever. Has he come? Will he go without seeing me? Ah! that is hardly likely. Has he not come at all? Can't I write to him and tell him how things are? I could in such wise break off our engagement, break it for ever; but—*should* people break engagements—and do I *want* to break my engagement?

My heart is still troubled with all these questions when—

There is a step upon the gravel near me, a quick, anxious, angry step. I have hardly time to emerge from the summer-house (I always prefer to meet trouble half way), when I find myself face to face with Sir Willoughby.

“Well, I have heard!” says he.

“About—about——” begin I, temporising rather meanly.

“Yes; exactly! About *that!*” says he, as if flinging my subterfuge to one side. “You are an heiress now, Molly, it appears!”

“Oh, you *have* heard,” murmur I, meekly.

“I suppose that puts an end to everything between

us?" He pauses, looking at me as if his life is depending on my answer, but I am silent. Indeed, I hardly know what to say! A month ago I should have been triumphant over this chance of escape that has just come to me; but now—— Well! what is the matter with me now?

"You don't speak," says he. "That is an answer in itself—an eloquent one. You will throw me over, of course. I am of no further use to you!"

With any other man this would have been almost a mean speech—with Sir Willoughby it is only one of the deepest humiliation. My heart begins to beat rapidly.

"Why do you speak to me like that?" cry I. "Use! Is it in that light I have regarded you?"

"Well, I think so," says he slowly, and oh! so kindly. Not a *touch* of reproach! My heart seems to die within me. I stand, silent, stupid, fighting with the tears that are threatening to destroy my dignity.

The night is full upon us, a lovely night—a very dream. Up above us, laughing at us perhaps, a little,

little moon (so young, so small, as to be quite a baby) is peeping at us between the branches of the tall dark firs.

"Why should I not think it?" says he, gently. "Am I a fellow that any pretty girl would fancy? And you, Molly, you are more than pretty—you are lovely. Now that you can let the world see you, you will find the world at your feet."

"I don't want the world," say I, my eyes on the ground.

"So you think now. But," sadly, "you will learn. And I had hoped that *I* should have shown it to you—the better part of it, that is—its lakes and mountains, its ever-varying scenery. But,"—dejectedly—"you can see it for yourself now."

"What a selfish view to take of it," say I, trying to find cause against him. "You are *sorry* that I can see it for myself?"

"Yes, it is true. I *am* sorry. I am," pausing and looking at me, "crushed to the very earth by the knowledge that I can no longer do anything for you."

Suddenly I turn to him and look into his face,

"It seems to me that you are very ready to give me up," I say.

"That is a heartless speech," says he, coldly. "One I should not have expected from you. To fight against the inevitable is mere folly. But as you put it to me, I will ask you whether you care to carry out our engagement?"

"Do you care to carry it out?" ask I, in a low tone.

"Oh, *don't* go on like that!" says he, a suspicion of disgust in his tone. "For Heaven's sake be honest with me. All I ask you, Molly is—if you wish our engagement at an end to say so. Say it *at once*, Molly! Do you hear? I should far rather know the worst now—this moment—than live in a fool's paradise for a week or two."

He waits. But I am again silent; I am lost in a maze of astonishment. I cannot bring myself to believe that the thing I am dying to say is the thing I really mean.

"There! that will do," says he. "'Silence gives consent.' How invaluable are those old proverbs!"

He pauses. "Of course," slowly, and with bitter self-contempt, "I knew you never cared for me; that you only tolerated me, at the best of times."

"Because you had money—and because I was poor?" ask I. I feel I am trembling from head to foot—with indignation it *ought* to be, but it is not. Some strange, new, queer feeling is struggling at my heart.

"Yes!" steadily. His clear eyes, very miserable eyes, are staring into mine. "If I had not been a rich man, you would never have given me a thought!"

"Do you know what you are saying?" cry I passionately. "Do you know what you are telling me? That I am a mere hateful mercenary creature?"

"That is not how I look at it," says he, earnestly. "It is not how you must look at it either."

"It is how you compel me to look at it."

"No, no," says he very gently. "I think not. To me it seems a very fair exchange. I was to give you a life free of money cares, you were to give me—yourself! Oh! no," says he quickly, "after all it was *not* a fair exchange! How much more were you

giving me than I could ever give to you? What could I offer you that could equal the delight I knew at the thought that one day I should regard you as my own. Well,"—slowly—"that delight is gone!"

"Sir Willoughby," begin I faintly. All uncertainty in my mind is over now. I know what I mean. I know how I feel. And terror has seized upon me. Terror lest he shall misunderstand me to the last—lest he shall go—lest he shall leave me here—heartbroken for want of him! But for the horrible fear that is consuming me, I could laugh aloud at the irony of this ending to my one courtship. I, who had so despised him, am now filled with anguish at the thought that I may lose him. Indeed I am tongue-tied—after that first attempt to speak, words fail me. What is it I want to say?

"Don't mind!" says he. He has cast a rapid glance at my face and is, I suppose, struck by its pallor. "All this is too much for you," he continues anxiously. "You will worry over it when I am gone, and I don't want that. I want you when you think of me—you," checking himself, "*will* think of me sometimes

—won't you, Molly?—to think of me kindly. I won't have you reproaching yourself in any way. In the end, that would make my memory hateful—and there is nothing to reproach yourself with. If any one is to be blamed it is myself. I was selfish when I tried to win you—without your love.”

“Oh, not selfish ! ”

“Yes, I was ; and yet, not wholly selfish. I honestly thought and believed that I could make you happy, that I could make you love me in time ! But,” wistfully, “all that was folly.”

I can *feel* that he is looking at me, that he is hoping against hope for one kind word—some gentle word to take away with him from the girl he loves. But I am now really on the point of tears—one word and I shall be in floods—and how could I bear that ! Already the drops are gathering on my lashes. To hide them I lower my head.

“You think, then, that it *was* folly—that I could never have made you happy ? ” says he, with a sharp indrawing of his breath. “Well ! you should know ! ”

“I *do* know ! ” burst I out at last, but alas ! as I

anticipated, with my first word comes a perfect shower-bath of tears. So sharp is the attack (the sharper for being so long restrained) that struggle as I will with it, I cannot bring to perfection another word. And yet I have so much to say !

“*Don't!*” says he vehemently. “Don't cry like that, Molly. Don't, darling ! Oh ! Molly, if *only* you could have loved me ! But, you see, it was too presumptuous a thought. My pretty sweetheart, don't give it another thought. Don't add to my grief by making me think I have caused you grief. Come—come back to the house. All this excitement is bad for you. And really, Molly, it is not so bad after all. I,” with a most wretched attempt at gaiety, “shall get over it. This time next year, perhaps, I shall be so far recovered that I shall be able to dance at your wedding.”

Here he stops dead short—as though the sound of his own words had killed him. He looks like one suddenly stabbed.

“I pray God I shall be dead before that,” says he.

He turns abruptly from me, and continues his walk

to the house; but I stand still. I don't think he knows that he has left me behind him, so full he is of his own thoughts. But he is going! That is the one fact that remains with me. He is going—once gone—shall I ever see him again. To me, this parting seems final.

“Wait—wait—one moment!” I gasp. “You don't understand!—you——”

I am holding out my hands to him in the dim moonlight. It is so dim now, indeed, that we can hardly see each other's faces. Diana, who can be very pleasant sometimes, is decidedly out of temper to-night. In fact the moon, that just a second ago was flooding the garden with her rays, making it difficult for me to hide my tears, has chosen this particular instant of all others to hide herself behind a cloud, so that Sir Willoughby cannot possibly see my face. If he had, I shouldn't have had occasion to explain anything!

“What don't I understand?” asks he, rather severely this time. “Have you not understood me? Do you think I am blaming you? Surely after all I

have said you can have no doubt about that. How could I hold you guilty for my unhappiness? It is all my own fault as I have said. I am a dull fellow—and an ugly fellow—and—that's the whole of it."

"Dull! Ugly! Oh, *no!*" say I with some vehemence. "I," slowly,—“I—I don't think you ugly at all. I,” trembling and half afraid to say it (though really it is the *truth*), “I think you a great deal nicer-looking than any man I know.”

“The men you know,” says he, contemptuously, “must be modern Calibans!” And then, “Look here, Molly. I suppose your idea is to let me down easy. To be as good to me as you can. But I can't stand that sort of thing. I'm not fool enough—or sneak enough—to accept a girl's *pity*. As long as you were poor we cried quits—now! There!” seeing the little gesture I make, “I'll admit you don't think me as ugly as you used to think me; you,” with a queer laugh, “have probably grown accustomed to me, but ugly I am, and ugly I shall remain to the end of time.”

“Oh! you *won't* believe!” cry I, a little wildly;

"perhaps you don't *want* to believe. But you shall hear it all the same. I don't think you ugly, and," putting out my hands to him, "I love you."

To my surprise and grief he takes my hands, but only to use them as a means of pushing me from him.

"Molly! this is unworthy!" says he. "It," breaking away involuntarily from the icy battlements he has erected round him, "it is unfair to you as well as to me. You should not tempt me. No! not another word. Come back to the house, like a good girl, and don't perjure yourself further."

"I shan't stir until you listen to me," say I; standing back from him defiantly. "You have compelled me to hear you—now hear me. I'm *not* perjuring myself. I am telling you the truth. I—I—I never knew it until—until you said you were going to give me up."

"*What!*"

"Well, until you said I was going to give you up. It is all the same," say I, impatiently. "I don't want to give you up!"

"Molly—think!" says he. His voice is low and unsteady.

"If I think any more, I will think you want to get rid of me!" cry I. "You—you are tired of me, perhaps," my voice breaking. "You—haven't kissed me *once* since you came, and you——"

"Do you know what you are saying?" interrupts he hoarsely.

"I do. I do indeed," sobbing. For really I am beginning now to believe in my own words—to feel afraid that they are true—to see occasion for his having grown deadly tired of me. Suddenly, as if compelled by a will stronger than my own, I move nearer to him, and, raising my face, lay one hand upon his breast.

"Will, if you still love me," I begin—I am indeed prepared to make a telling speech—when all at once I find speech beyond me!

I am folded to my Will's heart, and with a divine sense of rest and peace and rapture combined, I lift my arms, and, flinging them round his neck, kiss him with all my heart—kiss him as warmly—well, very *nearly* as warmly as he kisses me.

CHAPTER XXI.

“The end is, to have two made one
In will and in affection.”

To no one of us is it given to be more than five minutes in Paradise whilst still the burden of flesh is on us. Presently we—Will and I—come to our senses, and find ourselves able to articulate respectably, though still somewhat incoherently so far as Will is concerned. Fancy my ever having called him *Sir Willoughby*! Oh! it is *too* funny!

“It seems too good to be true,” says my dear idiot, after a while, who cannot see, in spite of all I have said, that he is throwing himself away. “I’m happier than a fellow ought to be. But, after all, other fellows haven’t met you!”

“No, poor fellows!” say I, with what I believe to

besarcasm deep enough to open his eyes. He proves, however, impervious to it.

“No; luckily,” says he, “for them! But I’m afraid this happiness is too great to last, Molly! It seems too—too *big* some way. To think that you do love me, now—now when you have got a fortune of your own.”

“I don’t see what that has got to do with it.”

“Don’t you? *I* do! Don’t you think I appreciate the fact that a pretty girl like you should love me for myself alone! Oh! I say, Molly,” nervously, “it doesn’t sound true, does it?”

“What doesn’t sound true?”

“That you should love such an ugly fellow as me.”

“Now, one word for all,” cry I, indignantly. “I won’t allow you to disparage my——”

Here I have the grace to pause.

“Your what?” eagerly.

“Future husband!” whisper I, turning away rather shyly, yet finding it impossible to repress a gay little laugh.

“Molly! Molly!” says Sir Willoughby. And then,

"How lovely that sounded! I say, Molly, say it again, will you?"

This, I feel, is too much.

"If *you're* a one-idead person," return I, with a tilt of my chin, "*I'm* not. No! You needn't ask me. I sha'n't repeat myself. But, really, Will, I mean it. I sha'n't let you say horrid things of yourself——"

I hesitate, and glance at him, and he looks so nice and kind, smiling down at me in the moonlight, that impulsively, but softly, I add—

"Your *darling* self!"

It is a mere whisper—and I rather regret this weakness on my part a second later, when I feel that there is no more breath left in my body. I push him away from me with a protest; but he still holds my hands, pressing them against his heart. When everything is said, surely the greatest joy of all is to know that one has made some one else altogether happy. Will is altogether happy now!


"Still, it must be confessed," says he, gazing down at me with deep delight, and looking—well—

almost—— No! I don't care *WHAT* the girls say—looking downright *HANDSOME*!—"that I'm not much where features are in question. It will be a case of 'Beauty and the Beast.'"

"Enough of that!" interrupt I. "I'm tired of hearing you called ugly by stupid people—you, yourself, the stupidest of the lot. Do you know, Will," catching hold of his coat and giving him a little shake, to conceal the embarrassment I am feeling, "at first I used to think you ugly, too. I used, really! That was horrid of me, wasn't it? But now—now I know what a mistake I made—I think, honestly, you know, that if you are not exactly handsome, you have the nicest face in all the world."

"Do you?" says Sir Willoughby; and then, after a struggle with himself, that I can see is violent, he gives way to most uncalled-for mirth.

"It's awfully good of you," says he. "It is, indeed! There, don't be angry, Molly! I'll—I'll try to regard myself as a modern Adonis for the future, if you wish. I'll give all my time to it. I daresay I shall be able to convince myself at last."



"Oh! you're laughing at me now," say I with a pout.

"Well, and isn't laughter the best thing in the world? I can tell you I think so. I've had too jolly little of it of late. I have never been sure of you all through, and to-day I thought I should have gone mad. I'll *never* forget how I felt when I heard you had come in for that abominable fortune of yours. Money is sometimes a most accursed thing, I think."

"It is an excellent thing," say I, with decision.

"It is ridiculous to say otherwise. And, at all events, I am glad we found that old chest."

"Why?"

"Because—well, because—if I had married you when I was so very poor, you might always have doubted that I loved you."

"True!" says he, "I might! And yet," brightening, "I was not so altogether far out, Molly, was I? I always said you *might* come to love me in time, and here you are loving me all at once."

"Yes, *all at once!*" repeat I thoughtfully. "I don't

think, Will, I ever had an idea that I loved you until you told me you were going to throw me over."

"I told you that?"

"Well, something like it. That opened my eyes! I felt then that if you did go I should die. Oh! I'm so *glad* I'm in love with you," cry I, throwing myself into his willing arms.

INTERLUDE.

"What will you have for a wedding present?" asks Will, presently.

"There is just *one* thing I should like," murmur I.

"But I don't know that I ought to ask for it."

"What is there you might not ask for, 'to the half of my kingdom'? Ah, that is a poor thing! The whole of my kingdom is yours to do what you will with."

"Is it? Then—I should like Blueskin!" say I, in a low tone. It seems so selfish of me. I am asking him for the horse he liked so well that he bought it from Dad. But oh! if only I could give it back to Dad!

"Blueskin ! I wish, Molly you had asked me for anything else !"

"Yes, yes, I know," I cry, earnestly. "It *is* bad of me. But—may I have him?"

"I——" He pauses. I can see in the moonlight that now is flooding bank, and sward, and our two faces, how terribly disconcerted he is. "I'm afraid I have given him away already."

"Given him *away* !"

"Not actually, but in thought."

"Oh ! Of course I shall not interfere with your—*thought* !"

"*Molly* ! What are you thinking of? I only meant——"

"I don't want to know what you meant."

"But, my darling, listen."

"Listen to *what* ? To—to—the name of the hateful person to whom——" Words fail me.

"Good heavens ! Molly ! It isn't like that at all. Now don't be angry with me, my lovely little sweet-heart ! The fact is, I have wanted ever so much to give him back to your father, because I knew when

I bought him that The O'Connor's heart was '*in* him,' as the peasants say here."

"Ah! Now why didn't you say so at once?" cry I, half laughing, half trembling. "Why, that is why I wanted Blueskin too. To give him back to Dad. If you could only *know* how he has missed him. Well," sighing, "you are too good for me—you are, indeed, and—Blueskin will go back to Dad, any way."

"He shall go back to 'Dad' through you only," says he. "Forgive me, my best beloved, that I denied you your request at first; but I had so longed to delight you with my restoration of that horse to your father that I fear I was unkind to you. Blueskin is yours, darling, to do what you will with."

"Then, that's settled. And if I *could* be happier, Will, than I was five minutes ago, you have made me so. To tell you the truth——"

I never tell him *that* truth, at all events. Time is not given me. A sudden sound of approaching footsteps, a merry laugh, and Kitty and Paddy Burke are upon us. They are in such exuberant spirits that I

conclude at once that all is well with them. I begin to feel deadly ashamed of my own sentimental mood. Kitty when happy, laughs. I, now that I have been made supremely happy, have done nothing but cry. There doesn't seem to be a grain of sense in me.

However, I cannot bring myself to be annoyed with Kitty when, Paddy and Sir Willoughby having moved a little to our right, she sidles up to me, and whispers, with large sympathy :

"Poor old Molly ! Of course he took it badly."

"What ?" say *I* tartly. "The measles ?"

"You are upset, ducky ! And no wonder, I'm sure. It must be dreadful to *have* to make a person unhappy."

"You have evidently been making a person happy."

"Yes. Yes," smirking idiotically. "Oh, he *is* happy. And"—ecstatically—"so am I, Molly."

"Well—so am I too."

"Heartless monster ! When you are happy," peeping at me most ungenerously, "do you always cry your eyes out ?"

"I was silly about that, Kitty, I confess," say I, climbing down in a hurry. "But, the fact is, he said he was going away, because of this money, you know—and I—well I—got *such* a fright."

"Eh? what? you don't mean to say that you——"

"Yes—just that," nodding my head. "I think there is no one like him, Kitty."

"Well, there isn't!" says Kitty, with an irrepressible chuckle. (After all, Kitty, when she likes, can be a little vulgar! And if Paddy isn't uglier than *Will* But some girls never can see anything)!

"I must say," goes on Kitty, when her ill-timed mirth is at an end, "that you are about the biggest swindler that ever *I* met! There you have been for weeks making me wretched over the thought that I was driving you into marriage with a man whom you detested, and in the long run it turns out that you would have died of fright if he hadn't married you."

"But I assure you, Kitty, I never knew it, until——"

"Oh! *there*! That's plenty!" says Kitty, shrug-

ging her shoulders. "By the bye, have you heard about——"

"Good gracious ! There is Geraldine," cry I, interrupting her remorselessly.

I am indeed so astonished by the appearance presented by Geraldine and her companion—Mr. Dickenson—that I feel as if I could have interrupted the Queen on her throne without an apology.

"Yes ; and I was just going to tell you——"

But Kitty's communications are lost to me. I have neither eyes nor ears now for any one but Geraldine. She comes sailing up to us through the moonlight, her little (he looks *dreadfully* little in this light) companion in tow. And there is something so appropriate in her whole air that in a sort of startled way I catch the air of the situation. She has accepted him. Oh ! no, that is not it—she has been graciously pleased to look with favour on this little, small, tiny man ! Gerry ! who has overawed Kitty and me all our lives !

"Oh ! Gerry ! what have you done ?" cry I, quite loud. Indeed my voice, now that with my usual

luck I have thoroughly committed myself, seems to my own horrified ears loud enough to make the welkin ring. I shrink back, driven to desperation by Kitty's whisper—

“You've done it at last,” says she contemptuously. “What a *fool* you are, Molly, as if any one couldn't have seen the road she was going.”

“Dear Marian,” says Geraldine in a clear tone. I was christened Marian, I believe, but, having heard nothing about it since my birth, the name now comes to me as a revelation and reduces me to powder. “Dear Marian, will you permit me to introduce Danby to you in a new character?”

So his name is Danby! I don't believe even Geraldine knew that an hour ago. And why not Dandy?

“Danby?” falter I.

“Yes,” says Geraldine with unrivalled dignity. “Danby Dickenson. He hopes—and so do I—that you will for the future regard him as a——”

“Man and a *brother*!” puts in Paddy Burke. “We're all brothers here, it seems to me.” (Paddy

has evidently been hearing things from Will.)

"I'm sure I'm delighted, Mr. Dickenson," falter I. "I mean," hurriedly—"that is—Dan——" here I break down ignominiously.

"Oh! no. Not *Dan*!" says Paddy Burke sweetly. "He wasn't christened Daniel—he——"

"I know that perfectly," declare I with indignation. "I merely meant—I forgot for a moment, and——"

"I see; you were inventing a pet name for your new relation. I'm sure, Dickenson, you ought to be awfully grateful. To be received like this with open arms is, to say the least of it, gratifying. If, Molly, you will only call me Pat, I shall remember it to you for ever."

"There, go away," says Sir Willoughby, giving him a playful shove. "Molly and I have something better to do than listening to your imbecilities all the evening. Where is The O'Connor? I want to speak to him."

"Poor old chap! I don't fancy he will be able to stand much *more* of it," says Mr. Burke. "He has been doing the heavy father for the past two hours.

Blessing *two* daughters in one day ought to be enough for any man. If he is compelled to bless a *third*, it will be fatal, I shouldn't wonder!"

He is still talking, I think, when we are well out of earshot. But we hurry away from him as fast as we can.

"I'm sure I pity poor Kitty," say I, wrathfully.

"I don't think you need," says Sir Willoughby, thoughtfully. "From what I have seen of her—*heard* rather—I should say she could hold her own."

"Well, certainly Kitty *can* talk," say I, laughing. "But," with sudden recollection, "so can I. It was only yesterday that Geraldine said (and very rude I thought it was of her) that"—hesitating—"I could talk the hind leg off an elephant! You," with a rather crestfallen air, "won't like that; I shall bore you to death perhaps."

"Do you think that likely, Molly?"

"Well, I don't know."

"I do. Every sound of your voice is music to me. And that old house of mine in Warwickshire—*your* house, too, by the way—how *good* that sounds

—why, it will take you all your time to fill it with your laughter. Do you know I have had the strangest feeling of late that I have never been alive until I met you !”

Something that is half fear, half delight, stirs my heart.

“How fond you are of me,” I murmur in a low tone.

“Oh, more !” says he, “much more than that.”

THE END.

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